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Clinton's Amnesia on Argentine Realities Matches That of His Tawdry Host

- *President Clinton praises Argentine President Menem for democratic achievements and human rights advances, while, in fact, the Argentine president has obstructed true advances in those directions*

President Clinton, whose superficial understanding of Latin American realities is burdened by no historical perspective or true sense of the region's recent travail, is bestowing praise on one of the hemisphere's most tawdry and controversial political figures, Argentine President Carlos Menem. In a one-week trip to three Latin American countries--none of whose democratic bona fides are all that secure--President Clinton has been unfortunately playing the role of a Babbitt engaged in commercial hustling. His one-dimensional emphasis on trade in a region which has repeatedly been gulled by foreigners selling snake oil which eventually turned to economic poison, have been inspired more by President Coolidge's words, "the business of America is business," than the high-minded vision of F.D.R. or President Kennedy. References to such abiding hemispheric problems as poverty and the concentration of wealth are dealt with by pro-forma one-liners that do not deserve to be taken seriously, since they are meant to cover bases rather than advance a great humanistic campaign.

Democratic Stalwart?

The U.S. President also has lauded the Argentine authorities (the heirs of those who coddled Nazi war criminals for decades) for overseeing democratic advances and the great strides the country has taken in the area of human rights. In fact, Menem has been a foe of democratic consolidation, disgracing its institutions by the non-stop scandals that have afflicted his tenure in office. Rather than the second San Martin that the White House portrays, Menem is little more than a self-serving hustler and manipulator who repeatedly lies and engages in acts of cover up in order to fend off accusations of corruption, feather his own nest, and defend the military against human rights accountability.

Menem's callous and raucous nature is epitomized by his larger-than-life personal situation. Tipping his hat to political expediency, Menem was reunited with his wife, Zulema Yomas, just in time for the 1988 Peronist presidential primary. However, after Yomas repeatedly criticized her husband for his social policies, Menem had her expelled from the presidential palace. Relations between the two further deteriorated in March 1995, when their son died in a helicopter crash; Yomas insists her son was murdered and that her ex-husband is covering it up.

Political or judicial opposition has proved no barrier to Menem's self-absorbing plans. Shortly after being elected president, Menem circumnavigated a resistant Supreme Court by enlarging it from 5 to 9 judges, and packing it with his supporters. Likewise, Congress has been effectively emasculated by the President's propensities to govern by decree, completely disregarding the Argentine electorate. It is universally believed that Menem is setting himself up to run for President again in 1999, with the Peronists pushing to once again amend the constitution to allow a president to serve three terms.

Old Traditions Continued

Demonstrating a massive indifference to his country's widespread unemployment and poverty as well as ethical sensibilities, Menem, a man of relatively humble origins and modest wealth, has transformed himself into being the lord of a stately manor. He has built a golf course so secluded that it is visible only from the air, and an international airport for his home-town of Anillaco (population 900) so he can fly his private jet to his new, palatial home--complete with sauna, gym, swimming pool and tennis court. As one Argentine journalist said, "Menem is building himself a private Disneyland in Anillaco." Making the Clinton soft-money campaign scandal appear an insignificant blip on the scale for public rectitude, after news of the facility was disclosed, Menem insisted that his house and airport were financed with private donations, mostly from the ranks of Argentina's business community.

Ruling With An Iron Hand

Menem's "Disneyland" also serves to further highlight the President's undemocratic psychology of attempting to control the press. While he was unable to block the broadcast of the investigative report detailing his desert empire, he did receive the satisfaction of seeing all four of the journalists responsible for it fired and the program cancelled. Only a month ago, a New York Times editorial said: "President Carlos Menem seems to be encouraging violence ... he publicly called for physical assaults against journalists who offend."

The Argentine President's modus operandi, without question, appears to be to strike first, and strike hard. Shortly after being fired for a disagreement over economic policy, his highly regarded former finance minister, Domingo Cavallo, charged that since 1990, cabinet members repeatedly gave judges instructions on how to handle important cases. As Cavallo said in a 1996 New York Times article, "In Argentina there is no security or justice." Menem's response was to attack the former minister's credibility, accusing him of being motivated by revenge, and seeing to it that he was expelled from the Peronist party.

Yet, allegations of a skewed and corrupt justice system have been a persistent theme throughout Menem's reign. In 1992 there was a bombing attack on the Israeli embassy, followed by the bombing of a Buenos Aires Jewish community center in 1994, causing a total death toll of almost 100 innocent victims. The failure of the authorities to act quickly and decisively to resolve these cases, which have been widely viewed in Argentina as a result of collusion by the police (who allegedly helped stage the bombing), has been seen as being sufficiently scandalous to prompt a U.S. Senate resolution condemning Menem's inaction.

When former Lt. Commander Adolfo Scilingo recently went public, cataloging his role in throwing desaparecidos into the South Atlantic

from airplanes during Argentina's "dirty war," Menem failed to use the opportunity to morally condemn the operations and hold the military responsible for its actions. Indeed, rather than seeking to redress the heinous excesses of the military dictatorship and advance human rights, Menem has been tireless in trying to deflect public media attention from the subject, insisting that the period of military rule must remain a matter of crime without punishment. Through a series of actions he has taken or directly supported, the entire officer corps of 1,000 has been exonerated from blame for atrocities conducted in the period of the "dirty war" from 1976 into the 1980s, and all of those involved in the murder of upwards of 18,000 civilians have been absolved. It is this military that now will be a candidate for high-tech weapons sales, due to Clinton's lifting of the Carter era arms ban, and whose sinister history has provided the basis for the outrageous White House offer to designate Argentina as "a non-NATO military ally," one of the most embarrassing and bizarre designations that as yet have been devised by the State Department.

No Friend Of Press Freedom

The recent murder of crusading photo-journalist Jose Luis Cabezas has raised more questions about the nefarious nature of Menem's government. A key suspect in the judicial investigation into this crime is the mega-business magnate and political power broker, Alfredo Yabran. A shadowy figure in Argentine life, Yabran has appeared in the country's media at the center of a corruption firestorm. In 1995, he was specifically identified by Cavallo as public enemy number one, the ultimate embodiment of the mafia in Argentine politics.

Since it took office, the Clinton Administration has supported Menem's policy of amnesia when it comes to human rights abuses. At the same time, the White House has followed a policy of selective indignation, insisting that war criminals indicted for crimes against the citizens of the former Yugoslavia and those involved in the killing of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents in Waco, be brought to justice. In its September 16, 1997 editorial, the New York Times flatly charged that Menem had "stunted its [Argentina's] democratic growth."

Clinton has been touring South America in what is, ostensibly, a celebration of democracy. Yet if democracy is so important to his administration, why is Menem's Argentina--the perversion of democracy--being drawn closer to the U.S., and on the verge of receiving major "non-NATO ally" status? The President and his wife are scheduled to spend their last night in the country at the Argentine resort city of Bariloche. The fact that no Argentine community harbored more exiles apparently was not enough to persuade the U.S. president to do what is right by deciding not to enjoy its hospitality.

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