

Oral Interview with Patricia Derian, with Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in President Jimmy Carter administration, March 12, 1996, reflecting back on US policy in the 1970s.

DERIAN: It seems to me that in that earlier period under Kissinger that the U.S. attitude towards the Soviet Union was a lot like Jeanne Kirkpatrick's and Ronald Reagan's. All that pandering to a lot of right wing dictators. Jeanne Kirkpatrick said that we needed to be friends and shouldn't impose this terrible human rights policy on them because we needed their votes in the UN and because we needed them for allies in the fight against communism. Once you thought about what people here who didn't want to discuss human rights stuff thought about it, it mostly amounted to the fact that the Soviet Union was seen as invincible, inevitable, unbelievably strong and that there was nothing we could do but live with them as they were.

But they [Argentina's military dictators] explained why they were doing the really terrible things they were doing and they wanted U.S. government approval. I'm told that indeed he (Kissinger) gave it and he gave them one year. Fred (Fernando Rondon) was there while I was talking to Hill and actually wrote a memcon (memorandum of conversation). I ripped off the top of it so that nobody would know that Fred had written it and I have it somewhere, should have brought it today. In any case, that was a great shock to me. It was the first footstep, in a way. Almost everywhere I went I was walking in Kissinger's footsteps. He let an awful lot of stuff go by.

Question: Well when you arrived in Argentina, you must have been about the first ranking person in the State Department in the Carter Administration to show up there.

DERIAN: I don't know if (ARA Assistant Secretary) Todman had been there or not. He was very keen on them. The position of ARA at that time was that you have to understand the junta's problems, you the Administration, that they have to do anything they have to do and actually they're not doing anything anyway. And that lasted for almost two years. It was unbelievable, absolutely. They were always trying to get military stuff for them. Just amazing!

Question: Were you getting reports from the embassy, to the effect what they actually were doing? How did we become aware? [Ed: for background see: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB85/>]

DERIAN: This was generated by the news, by reality. When things came in about Argentina, at the time, in cables, it was always about the military having to react. But when I got there, it was still, they practiced a very sophisticated, only by sheer thuggery, a form of terror on the people. That is, they'd stop a whole bunch of cars and pull people out. In fact I got up one morning in the Sheraton and you know how these windows, you open your curtain and there's just a solid piece of glass? There were people going to work and there were probably fifty soldiers and a whole bunch of Ford Falcons, unmarked cars also and they were pulling people out of cars, you know, making them spread out on the road, that type of thing. There was always dead bodies in the street. You'd find a naked body in a garbage can. Almost unbelievable when you look back at how grotesque and awful it was. Students were being taken away in the night. People who were in the address book of people who had been taken were brought in and kept. All of them were disappeared.

Question: These victims became known as the Disappeared Ones. Later there were demonstrations for years about this.

DERIAN: Right, right and they were just beginning. I met the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who were known, in Spanish, as "the madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo" and they were relatives, mostly parents, of young people, but not always young people, who were taken. And they're still demonstrating, because a lot of the

young women who were taken were pregnant. Many of them had their babies which were taken away from them and adopted by people in the military. The junta by then was pretty much in control.

Question: Well now, you arrived there. Here is this horrible thing which you are told is the fault of both sides. You're new to this whole situation. As you first approached this issue, what did you think? What would have been a solution or a method of operation that would have been acceptable to you in dealing with this problem?

DERIAN: When I spoke with them, the discussions were very interesting in these places. I think I saw [Gen. Roberto] Videla first [leader of the Argentine military junta]. Actually, maybe, they had a team of people from their Foreign Ministry, I've forgotten the name of the man and maybe we saw them first. Can't remember but it was one of those wonderful situations, a thing you love the theater of. Long, long, narrow table, many chairs. Everybody has an ashtray, everybody has a glass, everybody has a carafe, everybody has a tablet and you are sitting across from your counterpart, all the way down. And then two people talk. Just the two of you, nobody else talks. I'd start out and say how happy I am to have an opportunity to talk to them about some serious matters and make just the sketchiest little, maybe five or six sentence thing, which touches on the real names of the real things you're talking about: torture, execution, disappearance, all of that and acknowledges, acknowledged in that case, that they had a serious problem. Then whoever that other person was talked. And he explained their constitution. I'd always read the constitution before I'd go and try to get as good a fix as I can on the system of the administration of justice, because that's the nut of the thing. So they explain their history and their constitution and that usually takes 20 minutes, half an hour. I never look away from the person, I maintain eye contact the whole time because I don't want them to play off of somebody on my side who frowns if I say something or is writing frantically or off their own people, if they glance to the side. It's one of those things where you just want them to focus and pay attention and you don't want anybody else screwing up what you're doing.

So then they would get through and they deny everything. Nothing is going wrong here. There are terrible guerillas and those things, but we're taking care of them in a perfectly reasonable way. Then I talk about torture. When you go to a place like that, I think before I saw anybody in the government, I talked to maybe 50 or 60 people of every kind. The general rule of thumb, which perhaps doesn't apply in Singapore, was that people would express a variety of opinions, and maybe I told you this before, from one extreme to the other. That is, some would say nothing's wrong here and at the other end others would say everything's wrong here. And in between you get a core sampling of things. You try not in any way to lead them with your questions. You just say, "What happened to you? Where were you?" Ask those blunt questions. "Who did that to you" and "What was it they did? What time was it?" All that kind of stuff. Then you have a real sense of it but you also ask the bellhop, the man who sits next to you at the dinner party, every person you see, you ask what it's like to live there. I asked a young woman who sold me a handbag. She said, "Well, we're Irish." I said, "When did you come?" "Oh, four or five generations ago."

The dilemma that kind of thing causes in a country is just astonishing, the reach of the thing. Also, the reach on specific people. Going somewhere and finding an address and parking, breaking the door down and dragging the people out. Everywhere you go, and Argentina was a great place to learn because it was almost the worst of everything. Everywhere else I went was kind of a variation of that. Circumstances were different. Practices, the doing of the thing, just the same things the Soviets did, really intriguing. But in any case, you would have this long, long conversation and I liked it to last long. When I would say things like, "Well, you know, the government is responsible for this. You're the Minister of Interior. You're responsible." I never insulted them.