

✓
1836

CONFIDENTIAL

MEMORANDUM FOR THE AMBASSADOR

In response to your request for impressions of the present day Argentine-American scene, I am offering this review and evaluation, which, necessarily, must be appraised as deduction from personal observation rather than an authenticated treatise. Accordingly, it is in the form of a first-person, to you from me, narrative description of how things look to me, and, supposedly may be subjected to the same margin of error as is conceded most recorded impressions.

Background.

I was present in Mexico when the problem of Argentina's position within the Inter-American System confronted the conference of foreign ministers, and followed closely the developments at San Francisco. It was not until Mr. Braden returned from Buenos Aires, however, that I was given a close-up of Mr. Braden's pattern for our relations with Argentina. During a reception at the Chilean Embassy he, speaking in Spanish to don Carlos Dávila of Chile and me, gave a heroic, detailed, account of his private and official war with Colonel Perón.

That was the introduction, and I had supposed the story had been offered in confidence. Nevertheless, several weeks later I heard much the same elocution when Mr. Braden addressed the Overseas Writers Club at the Statler Hotel. The audience numbered most of the membership plus guests, nearly all being top Washington correspondents and State Department officers. During the ensuing months I heard or was told of other spoken variations by Mr. Braden of the epic until it became evident, at least to me, that our official attitude toward Argentina was being established upon the personal hatred of one man for another. At that time, though, I had not become aware that this feeling of abomination was shared between them, nor was I able to judge the truth or error in the charges, as all official opinion available to me and newspaper reports from Argentina supported Mr. Braden's case.

At the Assistant Secretary's side was a shrewd, aspiring counselor, Gustavo Durán, and others less astute but all willingly chorusing the refrain of no peace with Perón. That was the atmosphere I left when ordered to proceed on temporary assignment to Buenos Aires.

Upon resuming residence in Buenos Aires I renewed acquaintance with many Argentines, mostly active or former journalists, who, in varying degree, were anxious to offer their views on the existing political situation and forecasts of what would follow Perón's inauguration. As was expected, in La Nación from top to bottom and in offices of newspapers of comparable standing opinion was deeply pessimistic. In none of these, however, was heard any expression of intent to challenge the new national regime; rather, the atmosphere was torpid. Attitudes there were interpreted best in the words of Señor Angel Bohigas, Sub-Director and brains of La Nación, who told me in the same confidence with which I repeat it to you:

"La Nación is greatly disturbed by present conditions and apprehensive over what may come, but we are not going to fight Perón. We accept what seems the inevitable prospect of six years of his government, and sincerely hope things will not be so bad as appears to threaten just now. More than Perón, we fear the people around him, few of whom have shown capability in public life and who represent elements whose continued adherence to the new government is open to doubt. As Argentines, we hope the new President will succeed in establishing a stable administration. While we do not like what we are facing, we dislike more to contemplate what might happen should Perón suddenly be removed from power."

While he did not say so, Señor Bohigas obviously was expressing the views also of his colleagues of La Prensa. Significant to me was the fact that he did not indict Perón as a nazi or refer to any suspicion of the new President's inclination alleged elsewhere to favor enemy alien interests in Argentina.

During the course of other conversations I found a few who, for me, had personified Argentine reaction but now were willing or eager to give Perón a chance to prove his promise to make of Argentina a nation in the true sense. In no quarter, with the exception of part of the American community, did I hear approval of our Government's action in issuing the Blue Book. Whether for or against Perón, or noncommittal on the subject of the new President, Argentines regarded it and other actions of Mr. Braden as meddling in their internal affairs.

At this point, I wish to make clear to you that all the opinion related in the foregoing and to follow was volunteered spontaneously, requiring neither prompting nor agreement on my part.

Perhaps the most illuminating revelation I had from an Argentine of the privileged class was that offered by one of the more recently recognized thinkers, who had thrown his lot with the serious nationalists, and since has suffered ostracism from his caste. I shall give you his name, if you wish it, but am not writing it here because he became the subject of certain Embassy correspondence and even now is feeling the consequences.

He told me of his own patriotic resentment toward foreign influences in Argentina, which, he believes, obstruct the development of honestly national institutions. While crediting fully the enterprise of the British in supplying his country with transportation and public utilities, the commentator is exasperated over continued absentee ownership of what he believes rightfully should become Argentine enterprise. He does not discount the country's need for technical assistance from abroad, which he believes is vital, particularly, qualified guidance from the United States. He is convinced, however, that public utilities belong to the people of the country where they are operated.

Whether Mr. Braden was right or wrong in his opinion of Perón, this Argentine told me, he was completely in error in his estimate of the disposition of Perón's political support. He cited two qualities characteristic of the candidate's followers: youth and disillusionment. These people, he said, even if they ever had held any admiration for German accomplishment, had witnessed the collapse of nazism and all it represented long before the election, and had pledged their energies to Perón as the symbol of their hope for the future. As all the world loves a winner, so it is with Argentines- unless the loser is an Argentine- and Perón's youthful partisans, even before the war, my confidant attested, were leaning toward conviction that Argentina's material future lies with the United States, in substitution for the leadership of England. He said the influence of President Roosevelt had grown strong in Argentina, where it had penetrated far below the vocal, official stratum. When Perón began to paraphrase the best known words of our late President the masses caught their familiar ring.

How much of that sentiment is true, I do not know from personal observation, but I have heard from many of the intensity of President Roosevelt's hold upon the Argentine imagination. Certainly, the current intention

to raise a monument in Buenos Aires to his memory seems to be meeting with popular approval, and the issue here of a memorial five centavo (most widely circulated denomination) stamp on the anniversary of his death was an indication of Argentines' veneration for the Roosevelt figure.

While within the ranks of Perón's pre-election followers, my friend observed, existed the very nucleus of future Argentine-American understanding, what of the opposition blessed by Mr. Braden? In some of your correspondence you have given personal impressions of the behavior of these democratic leaders. What you have said agrees in considerable measure with this Argentine's evaluation. He goes farther, however, in saying Mr. Braden stupidly, but obviously sincerely, believed the avowal of democratic ideals recited to him by old line Radicals, sachems of the Sociedad Rural and Jockey Club, and Communist party leaders with their socially correct hangers-on. He complained further that even then (some months ago) candidates for study or travel grants from the Department of State were favored if they had opposed Perón. Among the successful ones, he said, were professed liberals and democrats whose loyalty, if put to the test, would be found on the side of international communism rather than that of our kind of democracy. Although I did not tell him so, privately I had to agree with him after looking into the records of a few.

Analysis.

The foregoing recitation is derived from the observations of an individual, but they are not too wide of impressions received from others, including some Americans. We have reports now that even in the Jockey Club guarded conversation may be heard to the effect that Perón is emerging as the eventual protector against sudden encroachment by labor, and that he will disavow the element that put him into power.

No kind word for Perón is offered, notwithstanding, in La Nación, La Prensa or the British controlled El Mundo. Most of the other newspapers are involved in fights for their lives, mostly rooted in the basically uneconomic local condition of an overcrowded periodical field, or inept business management. The strong ones are fighting to retain what had come to be regarded as their impregnable financial position. Undeniably, La Prensa and La Nación are great newspapers in the sense that other newspapers of the world bestow greatness. Whether they are spiritually eminent or less so is a matter not clearly established.

La Prensa, for which its adulators have borrowed from the Times of London the title of "The Thunderer," has been known to drop its tone to a whisper when its multi-million investment has been threatened. The ease of another great family has been in jeopardy, too, when impulses of the editors of La Nación have caused them injudiciously to time their remarks. As a former practicing newspaperman, I sometimes find it hard to take seriously the jeremiads of Argentina's important journals over the freedom of the press. This freedom is a tenet of democracy, and its maintenance presupposes responsibility and ideals in the minds of its beneficiaries as well as its defenders. Argentine journalistic idealism, I have found, is mostly of a practical kind.

As of today, I can find in the periodicals I read no evidence of official restriction on opinion. On the contrary, the press here seems to be overreaching freedom, and indulging license with, plainly, bad journalistic manners. Reports abound, nevertheless, that personnel of certain dailies, notably La Razon, have suffered physical abuse tolerated by the police of Colonel Velazco. Whether the reports are true or whether the Chief of Police, whose power this Embassy never should underestimate, has carried on a private campaign against individual newspapers, or was following orders, I am not sufficiently informed to offer comment. La Razon, of course, has been involved with the authorities over a debt, and is reported by a number of sources to have been or about to be acquired by interests around Señor Miranda.

It is established that newspapers are publishing news and opinion, but the fear of what may happen to them remains to plague their owners and editors. Despite the President's reaffirmation of the Government's free press policy, the unfortunate truth is that the opposition does not trust Perón's promises. Among many of the dissidents he is regarded as an adventurer, inclined to pledge his word and violate it without compunction whenever the action is suited to the need of accomplishing a major objective.

While on the subject of distrust of Perón prevalent in more than a few Argentine and foreign quarters, I need not tell you of widespread suspicion of a large part of his program. It may not have been reported to you so

faithfully, however, that some among Perón's detractors are saying that he is using deceitful tactics in his dealings with you. I know you must have evidence of this belief among critics in Washington, and we are aware of the attitude of at least one American correspondent, Miss Prewitt, who has referred to actions of yours as approaching appeasement. For the most part, the correspondents are making an effort, so far as I can learn, to understand your problem. The extent to which they can grasp the significance of developments in Argentina and the labor you are performing still leaves much to be desired. The news agencies, I believe, report the situation only as it develops and with a minimum of interpretation; hence, a piecemeal narrative of events. Kluckhohn and Miss Prewitt seem to regard themselves as keen observers and commentators, opinions not shared by their colleagues.

These two and Clark definitely are making your task more difficult and are not aiding in any other patriotic effort in Argentina. Despite them, I have found among old and new Argentine acquaintances a respect and admiration for the United States and its institutions unsuspected during my previous terms of residence here. I know of the esteem for you among the Argentines, and of what seems to me their fervent desire for the success of your effort to bring our relations into balance and restore the gains toward Argentine-American concord made before 1941 by President Roosevelt. The younger generation seems mostly not to have inherited its parents' spiritual affinity for Europe, and, since their President's words and actions indicate a break with the Old World past, Perón has at hand the elements for building.

Conclusion

In our political and economic relations with Argentina, the leadership and responsibility are yours, and you can have no uncertainty with regard to my attitude or sentiments. So far as concerns my qualifications as an observer, you are aware that I first came to Argentina to live more than 21 years ago and since have had several periods of residence here and elsewhere in Latin America. The opportunity has been available to view and study the Argentine people and their institutions, and from it I have derived what I believe to be a better than average understanding of various sociological features of this country.

Argentine nationalism seems to me to resemble somewhat the nationalism of which I have read as characterizing our

1436

- 7 -

own people between the Civil War and war with Spain. Immigration tides had not been assimilated in those days of industrial and agricultural expansion, and the United States had not attained a well defined international status. Our nationalism was immature and sometimes manifested itself in violence. In many respects the nationalism of Argentines, particularly in Buenos Aires, may be regarded as a close parallel to the temper of our people at a time when they were finding in themselves the qualities of world leadership.

Various publicists and statesmen in the United States like to compare Argentine nationalism with nazism, but the elements to support this theory are vague or nonexistent. With your intimate knowledge of such trends and understanding of the backgrounds of the German and Argentine people, you require nothing explanatory from me. What appears to fit with almost mathematical precision into the Argentine scene of today is the figure of a Perón. Whether this one is to be their Franklin Roosevelt or just another contribution to national disillusionment I doubt that any impartial observer can say at the moment. Perón's integrity is questioned at home and abroad, but since the time of his inauguration, which dates my opportunity to know his public personality, we have had ample evidence of his worthy intentions. You may or may not recall an occasion closely following your first meeting with Perón, when I asked whether you were impressed by the sincerity of the new President in his expressed desire for social readjustment. With your affirmative reply you added an outline of incidents in Perón's record which strengthened your belief in his honesty. Although some of the subsequent efforts to put his principles into practice have been handled fumblingly, even obstructively, by subordinates the intention always has appeared to be sincere.

In summarizing my attitude toward our political relationship with Argentina, the interpretation may appear to be merely fundamental in its simplicity. We recognize the present Government, as we recognized its predecessor. We acknowledge the honesty of the election raising Perón to power. Mr. Byrnes has placed certain conditions in the way of resumption of normal intercourse between our two countries. The Argentine Government, through Perón's promises and its commitments under the Chapultepec agreements, has undertaken to fulfill its obligations. Its faltering performance in carrying through pledges is causing irritation to our Government and people, and vexation for all who desire speedy normalization of relations. The move on the board is Perón's, but while he is being harrassed by advisers reminding him of legal limitations, and onlookers with nothing but ill-will toward us, it does not become those on the opposite side of the table to attempt to throw him off his game by a heckling recitation of the player's past errors.

Nelson Riley