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Buenos Aires, April 29, 1947

No. 2400

Subject: With Reference to an Article in the Saturday Evening Post and an Editorial in the Washington Post With Reference to the Argentine

The Honorable  
The Secretary of State,  
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

I have the honor to refer to the despatches which this Embassy has recently addressed to the Department with reference to the situation of the press in the Argentine and with particular reference to the freedom of the press and alleged action by the Government in the Argentine to restrict that freedom. The Embassy has reported that a good many of the statements made abroad with respect to the press in the Argentine are not correct and that the press in the Argentine has since the present administration came into office in June 1946 been able to maintain freedom with respect to the publication of the news and expression of comment.

There has recently appeared in the Saturday Evening Post an article by Frank KLUCKHOHN, formerly the New York Times correspondent in Buenos Aires, entitled "Argentina: New-World Superstate" and also an editorial on this article in the Post in the Washington Post. As this article in the Post and the editorial in the Washington Post are characteristic of certain inaccurate and extremely tendentious writing which has unfortunately characterized so much of the comment on the Argentine situation in a sector of our press and publications at home, I believe it is desirable that this Embassy should comment on these two articles.

At the outset, I wish to reiterate that no one could be more strongly of the opinion that complete freedom of the press must be maintained than I and my associates in this Embassy, and it is this point of view which I have consistently and strongly pressed before the high officials of the Argentine Government, and I believe that they are fully aware of the importance of the maintenance of the freedom of the press and so far determined to do so. That this is the situation is reflected in the press of the country itself. At the same time, this Embassy is of the opinion, as I believe all thoughtful persons are, that there never was a time when it is more important that the people of all countries, and particularly of our country, in view of the special responsibilities which have fallen on us, should be fully and adequately informed concerning all that is happening abroad which could be of interest to our people, and that it is vital that the newspapers and periodicals in the United States should keep our public opinion

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adequately and accurately informed concerning all major developments in the political, economic, and social fields in other countries. In view of our special problems and responsibilities in this hemisphere, this applied to the situation in the Argentine as well as to other American countries.

The Department will have noted that it is an interesting but unhappy circumstance that a part of the press at home is giving a great deal of attention to developments in the Argentine in a manner which is not always constructive and accurate and that the impression which has been built up in the minds of many of our people at home, as a result of certain such publicity, is that situations prevail in the Argentine which are different from those which prevail in other American states and which situations are sources of danger to the peace and security of this hemisphere. While there is no doubt that the situation in the Argentine is one which has to be carefully followed and that our public opinion at home should be fully and accurately informed, it is just because the Argentine is important in the American picture, and because much of interest is happening here that it is all the more imperative that our public opinion should be accurately informed.

Characteristic of the inaccurate and extremely tendentious reporting which has unfortunately appeared with reference to the Argentine are the Kluckhohn article in the Saturday Evening Post and the editorial commenting on it in the Washington Post.

I will not comment in detail on this article of Kluckhohn as to do so adequately would require a despatch much more complete than the article itself. The Department is familiar from the despatches of this Embassy with respect to the inaccurate and tendentious reporting of Kluckhohn from Buenos Aires while he was the Times correspondent here, and he has now carried this forward in the article in the Saturday Evening Post which has so wide a circulation. The article contains a reference to many things which have taken place in the Argentine but in practically every sentence and in some cases sentence after sentence, there is distortion and misrepresentation which it appears could not be otherwise than deliberate. Kluckhohn is a very intelligent man and his article in the Saturday Evening Post is one of the best examples of really clever and tendentious writing which I have seen to present a distorted point of view to the American public. Such an article, therefore, can do a great deal of harm, because of the wide circulation of the Saturday Evening Post, in our relationships with a country which in the world in which we live is increasingly important to us.

I am not going to comment on the article of Kluckhohn as to do so would require voluminous comment and to anyone who is familiar with the developments in the Argentine, the prejudiced and inaccurate character thereof is obvious. I

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wish, particularly, to refer to the editorial in the Washington Post in the issue of April 21 entitled "Argentine Superstate" which comments on Kluckhohn's article, as it is such editorials which can do even more harm in the misinforming and orientation of public opinion than the article on which the editorial is based.

In the second paragraph of this editorial it is stated:

"To write the Perón movement off as merely a resurgence of European fascism in the Western Hemisphere, would be an oversimplification. To be sure, it has most of the Nazi trappings. Educators are muzzled, and the state has sweeping control of the child's instruction and training. The press is either strangled or cowed through government newspaper control and other neat devices. Perón's police are numerous, ruthless and efficient. He has made a big play to labor and now has the unions completely under his thumb. He has adulterated the courts and has placed the country's banks under direction of his henchmen so that loans can be channeled to suit political aims. Meanwhile Perón talks democracy and rules by decree and rubber stamp."

To state that the Argentine Government has most of the "Nazi trappings" is completely inaccurate. It has become customary for certain writers to speak of the Argentine Government as Fascist, Nazi, and totalitarian. To anyone who is familiar with the atmosphere prevailing in a state in which Nazi, Fascistic or totalitarian doctrine is developing among the people or in the Government, such Nazi trappings are absent in the Argentine. Americans and others who are familiar from first-hand contact with the situations which developed in Germany, Italy, Soviet Russia, and in Spain, and who have been in the Argentine, cannot note or feel any of the "Nazi trappings" to which Kluckhohn refers. To speak of the economic measures which the Argentine Government has taken as Nazi or totalitarian in character is a surface appreciation; and if these economic measures would be the basis of characterizing the Argentine Government as having "Nazi trappings", the same would have to be applied to some others of the American states and to England and to France and other European countries.

To state that "educators are muzzled" is inaccurate. To state that "state has sweeping control of the child's instruction and training" is not correct. The present control over the educational system in the Argentine is very similar to our own at home so far as such control exists, and there is no direction by the state so far as the teaching in the schools is concerned which involves ideological concepts or directives. To make such a statement that "educators are muzzled" is a very serious one for it gives the American reader a picture of the Argentine situation which is utterly incorrect.

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The statement in the editorial that the "press is either strangled or cowed through government newsprint control and other neat devices" is also not accurate, for anyone familiar with the Buenos Aires press knows that it is free in the publication of the news and in the expression of comment. So far as newsprint control is concerned, the newspapers which are most in opposition to the Government are the ones which are getting the considerable majority of the newsprint which is available to the Argentine. So far as the size of La Prensa and Nación are concerned, which are the two principal papers in opposition to the Government, they are consuming as much if not more newsprint today than when the present administration came into office.

The statement that "Perón's police are numerous, ruthless and efficient" is correct in the sense that the Buenos Aires police force is relatively large and is efficient, but to state that they are "ruthless" is doing an injustice to a considerable body of capable men. During the period of the de facto government which preceded the present constitutional government, there were ruthless acts by the police in connection with political acts and demonstrations but this has not characterized the actions of the police since the constitutional government came into office in June 1946.

The statement that "he has made a big play to labor and now has the unions completely under his thumb" is not correct. There is a considerable part of the labor movement which is supporting the program of the present Government. There is another considerable part of the labor movement which is not in sympathy with some of the program of the Government. There is no doubt that the Argentine Government is seeking the basis of its support among labor and the middle classes and is doing this in contradistinction to the support which some of the other American republics are seeking in the armed forces.

It is not correct that "he has adulterated the courts". It is true that the Supreme Court has been impeached by the Chamber of Deputies and that the trial is now going on in the Senate and the probabilities are that affirmative action will be taken in these impeachment proceedings in the Senate.

There is a considerable body of public opinion in the Argentine and in the Government itself which believes that this action on the part of the Congress has been unwise and grew out of the political passions of the campaign which brought the present administration into power. The courts, however, in the Argentine, with the exception of the Supreme Court, have been functioning normally and to say that President PERON has "adulterated the courts" is a sweeping statement which is resented by Argentines whether they are for or against the Government. To determine what the result of impeachment of the Supreme Court may be in the Argentine only time can tell, and any premature judgments on the action with respect to the Supreme Court, unwise as it undoubtedly has been, is as premature as were the judgments with reference to the action of former President ROOSEVELT

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with reference to the Supreme Court in the United States in the early period of his first administration.

To say that he has "placed the country's banks under the direction of his henchmen so that loans can be channeled to suit political aims" is a further statement of tendentious character which is not accurate. It is correct that under the new banking law, the Central Bank exercises a certain control over the banks and over loans, but the American and foreign as well as the native banks in the Argentine would, I believe, state that this control has not interfered seriously with their normal activities, except in increasing paper work and that it has not so far been used for political purposes.

The statement that "Perón talks democracy and rules by decree and rubber stamp" is a misrepresentation of the administrative and legislative situation in the Argentine, for anyone who is familiar with the situation prevailing in the Argentine knows that the Congress is a very real factor and is, in no sense, controlled in this manner by the President or the Executive Branch of the Government.

The implications left in further paragraphs of the editorial that the Argentine has military objectives directed against its neighbors are not borne out by the acts or developments. The Argentine Government has made it clear that it desires to enter into the defense pact with the other American republics and this involves common action by the American states against an extra-hemisphere aggressor and would certainly involve common action against a hemisphere aggressor. Any thoughtful person will realize that if the Argentine Government were interested in military aggression against its neighbors, it would not be interested in a defense pact. It would have to be coaxed or forced into such a pact if it had such aggressive intentions. On the other hand, the Argentine is assuming an attitude of fostering this pact.

I have been led to make this comment on the Washington Post editorial not because this Embassy is in any sense acting as a defender of the Argentine Government or its practices. As is its duty, this Embassy is reporting fully to the Department on all phases of developments in the Argentine, but it is doing so objectively and accurately as it is a primary need of our Government that it should be informed in this manner concerning developments here. It is not a function of our Government to give to the press information with regard to developments in other countries. This is the function of our press. The Washington Post is a newspaper which on many occasions has played a great role and it can have a very important influence not only at home but abroad. In many ways, the Washington Post has played a very constructive role through accurate reporting on conditions abroad and in constructive and sound editorial comment. It is difficult, however, to escape the impression that so far as concerns the Argentine this newspaper has seen fit to take a hostile attitude and

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in its news and in its editorial policy has given a distorted picture of the developments and the situation in the country. In view of the fact that this newspaper is so widely read in Washington, which is the nation's capital, and as it has enjoyed a reputation for independent and sound comment as well as accurate news policy, the unfortunate results of a biased attitude with reference to any particular country or situation are the more obvious.

In these days when the freedom of the press is so definitely and so important an issue, a great deal will depend, so far as the maintenance of the freedom of the press is concerned, upon the accuracy and objectivity of the press. Sectors of our public opinion at home become accustomed over the years to have respect for the objectivity and accuracy for certain newspapers at home and to place great weight on the editorial comment therein. The role which can be played by a responsible newspaper is, therefore, a very important and vital one. Such a situation has its advantages and its disadvantages. The disadvantages lie in the circumstance that the reading public for the most part is not in a position to judge the accuracy of the news or to determine the soundness of editorial comment which appears in a particular paper. The reading public accepts it because it has confidence in the past record of a paper.

Such a constructive role has been played by the Washington Post in recent years, and it is, therefore, all the more regrettable that such an editorial as the one under comment should appear. Such editorial comment as that in the editorial entitled "Argentine Superstate", so little of which is based on fact, can do a great deal to prejudice, in due course, the influence of so important a paper.

This despatch is not written with any feeling of any kind, for the writer is one of those who has had great respect for the news and editorial policy of the Washington Post. It is because such editorial comment can have so unfortunate an effect on public opinion and because it can make the conduct of our relations more difficult that I have felt it necessary to write this despatch.

There is a large and discriminating newspaper-reading public in Buenos Aires and relatively so in most of the American capitals and larger cities. There is, therefore, no doubt that the Washington Post or any other newspaper which has had the respect of well-informed persons will lose that respect because of articles and editorials on the Argentine situation which are causing much surprise because of their obviously prejudiced character.

In this general connection, it will be recalled that various incidents in the Argentine and in others of the American countries during which stones have been thrown or threats have been made against certain newspapers have

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received much publicity in the press at home and that these acts of irresponsible individuals have been pictured by parts of our press as being instigated by government, when as a matter of fact, government has had nothing whatever to do with such acts which are grown out of the passions of individuals, groups, and crowds. Newspaper readers in the Argentine who have read these reports in our press or in the news dispatches of some of our agencies have realized the true character of these incidents in the Argentine and in some of these other Latin countries and have not been able to understand the implications left that they were acts of government.

These same readers, therefore, will read with a certain interest a Reuter dispatch which appeared in the Buenos Aires Standard and other newspapers here of April 26, 1947, entitled "Radical U.S. Newspaper in Trouble" and will appreciate that this reported incident with respect to this paper in North Dakota has nothing to do with government action.

Respectfully yours,

George S. Messersmith

Enclosure:

Clipping from The Standard,  
Buenos Aires, April 26, 1947

To Department in quintuplicate  
Copy, Chief, Division of River Plate Affairs  
File No.: 800/891  
GSMessersmith:clp

A true copy of  
the signed original.  
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