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1/27/78

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

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Agree  
actively  
with  
comments

SEEN BY  
ASST. SEC. DEKIAN

[Redacted]

TO: The Deputy Secretary  
FROM: ARA - John A. Bushnell, Acting  
SUBJECT: Is the Argentine Navy on the Side of the  
Angels?

You requested our thoughts on whether Argentine Navy  
Commander Massera may not be one of the villains in the  
Argentine drama, after all.

Massera has worked actively of late to foster the  
notion that he is the most democratic member of the  
Argentine ruling junta and the one who would show the  
greatest respect for human rights. He has gone out of  
his way to befriend union leaders, Peronist politicians  
and Jewish leaders. He has also made it a point to tell  
visiting American officials that his Navy is innocent  
of wrongdoing because it has only a peripheral role in  
counter-terrorism. But this is nonsense. Massera's  
1,000 man marine force is among the most active of the  
counter-terrorist forces. We have quite credible  
reports that the Navy has been responsible for repres-  
sion against priests, and that the Navy Mechanics School  
in Buenos Aires has been used as a torture center.  
None of these activities could escape Massera's knowledge  
because of all the services in Argentina, Massera's is  
the most tightly controlled.

On the other hand, Massera is the most astute and  
ambitious of the Junta members, and smart enough to  
realize that a public stance on behalf of human rights  
will enhance his chances to become Argentina's President  
when he retires from the Navy (possibly late this year).  
It appears that Massera would like to seduce Argentina's  
labor unions and the Peronist Party into supporting him,

[Redacted] (GDS)

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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)  
U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS  
Margaret P. Grafeld, Director  
 Release ( ) Excise ( ) Deny  
Exemption(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
Declassify: ( ) In Part  In Full  
( ) Classify as \_\_\_ ( ) Extend as \_\_\_ ( ) Downgrade to \_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_ Declassify on \_\_\_\_\_ Reason \_\_\_\_\_

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much as Peron (no democrat, either) courted labor in the forties. This explains Massera's public opposition to the belt-tightening policies of the Economy Minister, who is at once anathema to labor and closely linked to Videla.

Human rights aside, Massera is, or affects to be, a jingoist. He ordered the Navy to fire against Russian trawlers last fall in an action which caused casualties and had not been approved by Videla. And he seems to have flirted with the notion of a grandstanding military action against Chile in the Beagle Channel in an effort to curry nationalist favor. He has not shared Videla's desire for a close relationship with the United States, and had privately criticized Videla's attendance at the Panama treaty signing and indicated that Argentina should not accommodate to us on the nuclear issue.

The prevailing Argentine view is that Massera is a strong leader, not usually said of Videla, but that he is unprincipled. What militates most against Massera's ambitions is that the Army, which cares little for Massera, is by far the most important military force. At all events, the image which he seems to be successfully cultivating in some quarters does not exactly accord with the facts as we know them.

We have asked Embassy Buenos Aires for further comment.

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