

F O R E W O R D

By Robert Cox

This is the book that I could not write. Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since the end of the aptly named “Dirty War” in Argentina, yet I still find it too painful to relive those malevolent times by writing about them. So, I am deeply indebted to my son David for telling the story of a small English-language daily newspaper, the Buenos Aires Herald, which saved lives by refusing to be silenced by terrorism.

It is a story that should be told, but not by me. I have always believed in impersonal journalism, the reporter in a shabby raincoat that nobody notices who writes his stories without a byline. I was, trite as it may sound, just doing my job as editor of the newspaper, and the Herald was continuing a tradition of reporting in English what the Argentine press covered up in Spanish.

It wasn't easy to “just do your job” in Argentina in the 1970s. During the first half of the decade, Argentina was under attack from terrorists who may be loosely described as “left-wing,” although in the early 1970s, I counted more than 30 armed groups that covered the political spectrum from strutting Nazis to mad Maoists. The second half of the 1970s was characterized by state terrorism. I personally went from being seen as a right-wing imperialist by the left for denouncing their acts of terror to finding myself transformed into a subversive Communist by the right for opposing state terrorism. I didn't change. The political climate changed. I was just doing my job.

At first I didn't understand why the other media didn't do their jobs by simply reporting what was happening in Argentina. It was true that television was a government monopoly, and most of the radio stations were state owned. But the newspapers were another matter. They could have made a difference, as the Herald did. Perhaps years of adaptation to dictatorship prior to the military takeover of

March 24, 1976, explained why the owners and editors of the major newspapers instinctively looked the other way when counter-terrorism took on a terrifying new dimension, through what are now known as “forced disappearances.”

The military junta abducted people they suspected of “subversion” – which took in a swathe of humanity from armed militants to radicalized high school kids and almost everyone in between. They were rounded up and hauled off to clandestine jails where they were tortured, the easiest but most treacherous way to secure information. The routine use of torture explains why so many innocent people died in the maw of the military’s killing machine.

If you have nothing to tell your interrogators when you are under torture, the torment is increased to the point where the victim expires. The other sinister consequence of using torture as a counter-terrorism method is that once someone has been taken into the netherworld of the torture center, he or she has to be silenced so that the general public will not know that illegal methods are being used by the state. The easiest solution is to murder the innocent person who might testify against you. Thus it was that Catholic nuns and priests and an unknowable number of innocent people were killed so that they would not tell what they had suffered and seen in their passage through hell.

The Argentine military found themselves in the same area of transcendent evil as the Nazi SS. They could never admit what they did because their crimes were so terrible. To this day, only one military officer, navy Capt. Adolfo Scilingo, has disclosed how thousands of people were tortured and killed. His trial was held in Spain, not Argentina. On a cold day in February 2005, I gave evidence at Scilingo’s trial in Madrid. He cut a pathetic figure because he originally went public, describing how he threw prisoners to their deaths from a navy plane into the Atlantic, because he was aggrieved that he had not been promoted.

Eighteen years later in 1995, he admitted to taking part in two “death flights” from a navy school in the heart of Buenos Aires that was used as a clandestine torture center and concentration camp. Prisoners were drugged under the pretense that they were being vaccinated before being transferred to a legal prison. Navy officers pushed them from the planes into the Atlantic Ocean. It’s estimated that some 3,000 of the 5,000 people held at the now notorious ESMA (Navy Mechanics School) were liquidated in this way.

Scilingo, neatly dressed in a light-gray suit and tie, was in court because in 1997 he voluntarily traveled to Spain to repeat his confession made earlier in Argentina to a journalist who subsequently wrote a best-selling book about it. He told the

investigating judge, Baltasar Garzon, that he wanted to see justice done and that was not possible in Argentina. He told the judge everything he knew about ESMA in two long tape-recorded declarations that were played at the trial a few days before I gave testimony for the prosecution.

He described the methods of torture, the cremation of bodies in what were called “*asados*” (barbecues), and the “humanitarian” treatment of pregnant women. “For humanitarian reasons, the pregnant women could not be transferred ... I mean, eliminated,” Scilingo explained. “We had to wait until they gave birth.” Then the mothers were killed, and their babies, complete with false papers, were given to childless military officers.

There was not anything new in what Scilingo recounted. Argentina in the 1970s was like Germany under Hitler. Everyone knew what was going on but refused to see or react, either because they were acquiescent or fearful, to the systematic mass murder of suspected enemies of the regime. What was new was that Scilingo was the first and still is the only military officer to break the pact of silence protecting the dictatorship’s torturers and executioners.

“I was not a monster,” Scilingo told the judge, but “without coercion and of our own free will, we were changed into monsters.”

Judge Garzon then asked Scilingo if he ratified his statement that he threw live people from the planes on two flights that carried 30 victims to their deaths. When he did so, to Scilingo’s surprise and anger, the judge ordered his arrest. He has been in jail since, sentenced in April 2005 to 640 years for crimes against humanity. On appeal, the Spanish Supreme Court increased his sentence to 1,084 years, finding him guilty of murder and unlawful detention. Under Spanish law, he will serve a maximum of 25 years. When brought to trial, Scilingo recanted his testimony and claimed that he made up the story of his own participation in the “death flights” to draw attention to the crimes committed by the military. At ESMA, he said, “I was just the electrician.”

The ultimate objective of the trial was to end impunity for those accused of crimes against humanity. Spanish justice, perhaps psychologically impelled to compensate for Francisco Franco’s long dictatorship, intends to pursue cases in which the crimes of institutionalized murder and torture would go unpunished in the countries in which they were committed.

When I agreed to testify about the military regime at Scilingo’s trial, I did so because I felt it was my duty. As a newspaper editor in Buenos Aires, I was mortified as successive Argentine governments denied Israeli requests to extradite Nazi war

criminals who had been welcomed by the government of Juan Domingo Peron. Nazi influence over Argentina was never eradicated.

Indeed, Nazi methods were imitated when the military took power in 1976. The Argentine version of the Einsatzgruppen, SS squads who hunted down Jews in Europe, was known as "*grupos de tarea*" (task groups). People were dragged from their homes in the early hours, routinely tortured and killed in the thousands. I myself saw the symbol of the regime, a huge swastika and the sign "*Nazinacionalismo*" painted at the entrance to one underground prison and torture center.

I also had another reason for testifying: unfinished business. Following the return to democracy in Argentina in 1983, I was asked by the government to take the stand in a trial that was unprecedented in Latin America. For the first time, a dictatorship was on trial.

Nine generals and admirals – who served on the military juntas that imposed a rule of terror on Argentina from the March 1976 coup until the military's departure after the humiliating defeat in the war over the Falkland Islands – were brought to justice. Five were convicted and sentences ranging from life imprisonment for Gen. Rafael Videla, the first de facto president, as well as for Adm. Emilio Massera, to much shorter terms for the other three commanders. But after only a few years spent at military prisons that were more like country clubs, all were pardoned.

It was not until 2005 that the Argentine Supreme Court declared the "impunity laws" unconstitutional, and trials have resumed with life sentences imposed on a police officer and a police chaplain for their complicity in torture and murders in clandestine prisons.

Justice in Argentina is long overdue. The statement of the special commission appointed in 1983 to investigate the disappearances is still valid today: "We can state categorically – contrary to what the executors of this sinister plan maintain – that they did not pursue only the members of political organizations who carried out acts of terrorism. Among the victims are thousands who never had any links with such activity but were nevertheless subjected to horrific torture because they opposed the military dictatorship, took part in union or student activities, were well-known intellectuals who questioned state terrorism, or simply because they were relatives, friends or names included in the address book of someone."

The commission's report was titled "*Nunca Mas*" (Never Again). The paradoxical role of Adolfo Scilingo, the man who said he wanted justice, confessed and then recanted but was finally found guilty of crimes against humanity in Spain, shamed the Argentine judiciary into action.

I spent 20 years as a journalist in Argentina, the last 10 of them as the editor-in-chief of the Buenos Aires Herald. The most important thing that I learned from those tumultuous years was the answer to a question that puzzled me deeply. How was it possible for the Nazis to exterminate millions of people without significant protest from ordinary, decent Germans? To put it more bluntly: How could decent people, especially those who lived next door to a concentration camp, deny what was obvious.

The “Dirty War” in Argentina answered that question for me. Human beings flinch from reality and deny the obvious, particularly when they feel threatened by acts of terror. In Argentina people didn’t want to know their government’s dirty secrets, and the press obliged by not reporting what was going on.

I was often asked in Argentina how it was that the Buenos Aires Herald, a small foreign-language newspaper, was able to report in English and comment in Spanish on topics that were never mentioned in the Argentine press. Argentine journalists had two theories: That we were supported by the U.S. Embassy and that, as a foreign-language newspaper, we had immunity.

Neither was true. What we did have was respect for the Herald’s traditional independence and unqualified support from Peter Manigault, president and publisher of the Charleston, S.C.-based Evening Post Publishing Company, which owned the newspaper. He simply wanted us to do our job and report the truth. That was the difference between the Herald and the mainline Argentine press. They were accomplices of the dictatorship. The Herald was not.

Argentina’s “Dirty War” also made me realize more forcefully than ever before that a free press is indispensable in upholding democracy in times of terror. Faced with a terrorist threat, the Argentine military commanders responded with their own brand of terrorism. They stole, they raped and they murdered, and they were not held accountable. The country’s institutions broke down, including the ordinary citizen’s safeguard and last resort – the media. Citing the threat of terrorism, the armed forces and police justified torture and murder. Their enemies were demonized and the “subversive” citizens they saw everywhere were considered dispensable “non-persons.” The military, as Scilingo acknowledged, “changed into monsters.”

The last time I saw Cardinal Pio Laghi, whom I knew when he was the Apostolic Nuncio in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship, was in Washington in 1980 after he became the Vatican’s top diplomat in the United States. He used the same words to describe the military commanders he knew so well when he was the Apostolic Nuncio in Buenos Aires: “They were monsters,” he told me.

He hadn't wanted to see me again, and I had to insist that he receive me in his office at the Nunciature on Massachusetts Avenue. I understood he didn't want to be reminded of his days in Buenos Aires when Adm. Massera, the most murderous member of the junta, was his tennis partner. He doesn't want to think about those monsters, as I have never wanted to write about them.

A reviewer of *En Honor de la Verdad (In Honor of the Truth)*, a memoir of my exile from Argentina written by my son David, said that a father could not hope for a greater honor than a son's appreciation of his work. I am doubly grateful to him for writing the book I could never write.