THE TERM PYRRHIC VICTORY readily comes to mind in describing Argentina’s decade-long war with multiple organizations that sowed terror and reaped counterterror, all of which continues to haunt the country’s politics. Like the ancient king of Epirus, the Argentine authorities of the time may have wiped out the terrorist groups with near finality, but they did so at an exorbitant cost for which the Argentine nation is still paying.¹ To be explicit, the governments of Argentina defeated, indeed eliminated, the terrorist threat but at such a price in lives and legality that democratically elected regimes will still be plagued by the past, leaving, among other things, Argentina’s ability to combat similar or related threats now and in the future a very open question.²

How could the Argentines get it so wrong? To be sure, combating a determined terrorist force is never easy or free of mistakes. Innocent lives will be lost or damaged no matter how the war is conducted. In Argentina’s case, however, this commonsense assessment cannot be plausibly argued. Why the security forces got it wrong, meanwhile, may be a simple question for which there is no
equally simple answer. But searching for that answer in a cool and dispassionate manner may tell us much about how to meet a terrorist threat efficiently and humanely anywhere in the world, far more so, in fact, than any “successful” counterterrorism campaign could ever do.

In saying all that, the following will serve in no way as an apology for the violent left-wing groups that sought a new Argentina, aping the revolutionary movements and governments that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the literature on Argentina’s so-called guerra sucia criticizes governmental authorities, the military and police in particular, and conveniently minimizes or ignores altogether the atrocities of the Left. That said, however, minimizing the responsibility of the security forces simply plays into the agenda of those who have no interest in fostering a genuine respect for human rights—especially (and being the most basic), government resting on the consent of the governed.3

In any just and settled judgment on those years, that one-sided approach cannot be left unchallenged. It should be remembered that the war of the Argentine armed groups that sought the overthrow of authority—whether elected civilian or military—was conducted without a shred of legality or concern for human rights. The war they waged was neither a good nor just one. It was a war in which the leadership, at least, fled the country when threatened, ordering their followers to commit suicide rather than risk capture and interrogation.

A question remains, however. How could a war against terrorism that had the overwhelming support of the Argentine people, at least in the beginning, prove to be the worst managed in the hemisphere? To begin answering this question requires a clear understanding of the war’s background, which runs deep into Argentine society.

BACKGROUND TO TERRORISM

Argentina’s inability to combat terrorism effectively is in part a result of the fact that Argentina remained, ironically, largely untouched by guerrilla violence during the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, this situation was not thought to be remarkable. After all, Argentina did not
resemble the smaller and poorer nations of the hemisphere in Central America and the Caribbean or the northern tier of South American states, Colombia and Venezuela, much less the impoverished Andean nations, Peru and Bolivia.

Argentina, it was said, was too middle class, too urban, too developed economically and socially, too European (and, dare we say, too white) to be seriously threatened by rural-based guerrilleros (guerrillas) following a strategy of war involving small mobile groups of insurgents, despite the existence of one of that strategy’s crown princes, Ernesto Che Guevara, himself an Argentine, albeit a peripatetic one. A brief and disastrous attempt at rural insurgency based in Argentina’s far north in 1963 only seemed to confirm the conventional wisdom. To Guevara, the key to South America was Bolivia, not Argentina, which led him, on his rendezvous with destiny, to that Andean nation in 1967.4

To the extent that the hemispheric guerrilla convulsions in the Americas were voluntarist in nature rather than the result of social forces and conditions—which for the most part they were—suggests would-be revolutionaries felt the same way about their opportunities and where they could best expend their scarce resources. That place, in effect, was not Argentina, which they believed was simply not poor or brown enough for another one of Guevara’s celebrated “two or three Vietnams.” Argentina, in fact, would have to wait for the second wave of revolutionary upheaval before it found itself in an internal war for which it was not prepared. Even then, in the so-called era of the urban guerrilla (which remained largely terrorist in tactics), Argentina lagged behind its immediate neighbors—Brazil, Uruguay, and, after the fall of Salvador Allende in September 1973, Chile as well. In all three, furthermore, the terrorist threat was both less and more ephemeral in nature and consequently did much less damage to each society, then and now. Finally, although the South American dirty wars are usually lumped together—those of Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and of course Argentina—it is the last country that was scarred most deeply by an internal war fought over a decade.

Uruguay could have provided an especially apt warning for the Argentines, who prefer peaceful over violent change. Uruguay, too, shared Argentina’s Europeaness, not to mention its middle class mores. If anything, Uruguay had less of a gap between rich and poor
than Argentina, and, moreover, it boasted a democratic tradition that Argentina could hardly emulate. Uruguayans, then and now, point out with satisfaction their country’s steadfast support of the democratic allies of World Wars I and II, in contrast to Argentina’s spotty neutrality in both conflicts. Yet Uruguay would be afflicted with the violence-prone leftist Tupamaros, who attacked a government and society that, although middle class to the core, had long fallen into economic stagnation thanks in large part to the costs of a welfare state that its largely agro-livestock economy could no longer afford.\(^5\)

Although in many ways Argentina’s terrorist groups, the Montoneros especially, resembled the Tupamaros in background and motivation, not to mention tactics and strategy, they preceded them by half a decade. Many members and most of the leadership were middle class and university trained, with no particular outlet for their political ambitions or careers despite extra years of higher education. The system also produced a large number of university dropouts who could only acquire menial positions in the service sector (mostly in banking), which only added to the discontent. In Ernst Halperin’s acute judgment: “It is understandable that such an experience and such prospects may cause them to regard a total, revolutionary change of the social order as the only solution.”\(^6\)

Revolutionary change, the Tupamaros thought, would come through action in the cities (in Uruguay’s case, one city, the capital, Montevideo) rather than the countryside, which had been the graveyard for many a guerrillero in the 1960s, including Che Guevara, who died in Bolivia in October 1967. After all, the Tupamaros reasoned, the instruments of state power (the army and the police especially) were located primarily in urban not rural areas. Attacks on police and soldiers were therefore conducted there. To finance the revolution, for awhile the Tupamaros successfully resorted to kidnappings and bank robberies, which they conducted on a grand scale—their first appearance on the national stage was a raid on the casinos of the resort town of Punta del Este. In so doing, the Tupamaros could strike out at what they considered to be imperialism, which included the kidnapping of British ambassador Geoffrey Jackson (later Sir Geoffrey), who lived to tell his story, and U.S. Agency for International Development worker Daniel Mitrione, who did not.\(^7\)
Nearly all that applies to Uruguay’s Tupamaros, who reached the peak of their popularity in 1970, could also be ascribed to Argentina’s insurgents. The primary difference between the two is that the Tupamaros were a single (and single-minded) organization while Argentina could boast a number of terrorist groups. They came from a variety of ideological backgrounds—including left-wing Peronism and Trotskyism—always with a touch of Cuban-inspired *fidelismo*, the early *fidelismo*, it might be added, the kind found, for example, in Castro’s *Second Declaration of Havana*, a rousing call to arms against U.S. imperialism in the 1960s. They all—whether Montonero (Peronist) or ERP (Trotskyite)—shared the Tupamaro penchant for direct, armed action with activities financed by kidnappings of the wealthy (foreign as well as Argentine) and the robbing of banks as well as murder and general mayhem, including an ERP raid on Argentina’s Atucha nuclear power plant in 1973. Indeed, kidnappings became nearly an art form with the ERP, which pulled them off regularly (178 in 1973 alone). Significantly, while the ransom demands escalated—the top figure being $60 million for three Bunge and Born executives—most were paid and none of the kidnappings was ever solved by the police.8

Nor was all this violence nihilistic in nature. The better organized, more coherent ERP (in contrast to the Montoneros) had a relatively clear notion of where they were going in this prolonged war against the Argentine state. The ERP leaders believed in combining legal and illegal activities aimed at persuading a majority of Argentines that regime change could only take place through a revolution, not by means of “meaningless” elections. Moreover, they also believed that a victory in Argentina was only possible in the context of a continent-wide struggle that would distract and overwhelm even the resources of the United States—a theme made familiar by Che Guevara.9

Most of these ideas, including the virtues of urban over rural guerrilla warfare, were taken from the work of Abraham Guillén, a Spanish civil war veteran who wrote extensively on Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s.10 Guillén was an ideological eclectic arguing that a revolutionary vanguard could and should consist of various movements and not be confined to one sectarian group. The struggle, too, should be throughout Latin America in order to counter what he called “the Pentagon strategy” of picking off revolutionary movements one by one. Guillén’s focus on a united front
strategy was nothing new, but it did reject the unqualified leadership of any party, that is, one of the Soviet-oriented communist parties that could be found in every Latin American country and whose leaders had a penchant for asserting their status as primus inter pares. Above all, even though the leadership and cadres ought to be socialist in doctrine, socialism itself should be downplayed until victory is achieved. In any case, the main thrust of the revolutionary movement must be in urban areas, where a rapidly growing percentage of the region’s population was to be found. The focus on the city followed, of course, the failure of rural-based revolutions in Latin America after the single success in Cuba (the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua would occur more than a decade after Guillén’s major writings).  

Although critics of the Argentine repression of terrorism like to focus on the year in which the military took command once more (in March 1976), Argentine terrorist groups had been at work in the early 1970s during three different military regimes. When Juan Perón returned from political exile and resumed his presidency in September 1973, ERP continued its operations, although the Peronist Montoneros declared a cease-fire until Perón’s death and the assumption of power by the country’s vice president and his widow, Maria Estela Isabel Martínez de Perón. Indeed, one of the central objectives of the terrorist groups, including the Montoneros, was to escalate the violence during the Isabel years precisely to force the military into retaking power through the golpe, the classic coup d’état, which they hoped would prove unpopular as well as providing a huge boost in support for them from what they patronizingly referred to as “the masses.” These groups succeeded in doing this. But (as is often the case when getting what one wishes for) ultimately, the new military government lasted long enough, now that the Peronist option had seemingly vanished with the general’s death, to crush the rebels once and for all. But at what price?

**PROLEGOMENON TO ARGENTINA’S LONG, DIRTY WAR AGAINST TERRORISM**

The repression did not begin or end with the ascension to power of Gen. Jorge Videla in 1976, nor did the mayhem. By the first quarter
of 1976, Argentines had already been subjected to five years of bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings of police and military officers, judges, trade union leaders, and businessmen as well as to extortion, robberies, and incessant propaganda as to why the violence would eventually make them happier at a time when they were also subjected to falling standards of living and inept government, both civilian and military. They had also begun to lose all hope after the less than inspired return to rule of Juan Perón (after a nearly twenty year absence) and eighteen months of disastrous governance by his wife, Isabel, a former nightclub dancer.

Confronted with this onslaught, which many analysts at the time, both in Argentina and abroad, believed would lead to a civil war of catastrophic proportions, the various governments—military, then civilian, and then military again—waged a counterterrorist war of increasing ferocity. Perón himself made clear to the Montoneros that it was time for them to retire from direct action or face the consequences. They refused. With Perón’s passing in July 1974, the war against terrorism escalated under Señora Perón, whose advisers, the sinister José López Rega in particular, remained largely in charge. López Rega was, among other things, Isabel Perón’s personal astrologer.

Indeed, under the second Perón government, a textbook example of how not to conduct antiterrorist operations was introduced in the form of the Alianza Anticommunista Argentina (AAA), better known as the Triple A. To its few defenders, the AAA was presented as a kind of vigilante organization dedicated to killing communists and other insurgents who seemed beyond the law and the police. In fact, they were the police, or, more precisely, they were recruited, armed, and abetted, not to mention instructed, by the federal police and then López Rega—a dark and mysterious man whose death date to this day remains uncertain. Nevertheless, López Rega, as minister of social welfare (and himself a former police corporal), ran the AAA out of his own office.

As a set of vigilantes operating outside any semblance of the law, the Triple A more than lived up to its sinister reputation. Its agents, out of uniform, carried out their “duties” at night, moving in unmarked, made in Argentina Ford Falcons, sans license plates, and detaining and usually murdering their “suspects” with no regard to legal procedures. It should come as no surprise that the history of
the AAA has never been written owing to the utter lack of documentation. If any exists, it would probably reveal that the AAA seldom if ever liquidated any real terrorists. At most, it may have struck at suspected supporters and sympathizers of the armed Left, but the entirely innocent were also involved. How many and what the percentages were will probably never be known. But experience with undisciplined and undeterred operators with a license to kill from the nation’s highest authorities invariably reveals a pattern of gross misconduct, as that power is often used to settle private grudges under the cloak of counterterrorism. And finally it should be noted that no member of the Triple A was ever arrested, as the Argentine government turned a blind eye to its activities.\textsuperscript{12}

The Triple A would eventually vanish, along with its chief patron, López Rega, after the fall of the second Perón administration, although the date of its demise and his whereabouts after a brief stint as Argentina’s ambassador to Spain were never (and are still not) clear, typifying the shadowy character of this peculiar war in all its unsavory aspects. But the Triple A, for all its counterproductive efforts in fighting terrorism, was only a part of the picture—and as time went on a relatively small one at that.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{HOW NOT TO WAGE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM: PART ONE}

For the second half of the 1970s, the military, principally the army, held direct power in Argentina. In fact, it did so until it was displaced by democratic elections in 1983 brought about by Argentina’s defeat in the 1982 Falklands War against Great Britain and its redoubtable prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.\textsuperscript{14}

It is now conveniently almost forgotten how welcome the military takeover in March 1976 was to most Argentines at the time. General Perón had been dead for nearly two years, and the ship of state seemed rudderless under the inept command of his chosen successor, the widow Perón. Not only was Argentina subjected to the incessant and unstoppable attacks from multifarious armed groups, but the economy, once the pride of Latin America, was rapidly disappearing into a vortex of galloping inflation and agro-industrial decline. In her last and most turbulent year in office—March 1975 to March 1976—prices, for example, shot up at the then
unheard of rate of 738 percent and exploded to nearly a 1,000 percent per annum increase two months later.\textsuperscript{15}

It is little wonder that most Argentines felt relief after the bloodless coup that ended the brief rule of the erratic Señora Perón and her adviser López Rega or that Argentina’s best-known writer, Jorge Luis Borges, would pronounce: “Now we are governed by gentlemen,” an assessment a large majority no doubt shared at the time.\textsuperscript{16} Alas, good government was not to be.

What, then, explains the ineptitude and the counterproductive use of raw state power to suppress the terrorist threat that so affected the 1970s in Argentina and left that nation years later divided and embittered over who and what were responsible for it all? The answer, or more precisely the answers, to that question form the balance of this essay.

The most fundamental reason why Argentina’s experience with counterterrorism was less than satisfactory was its lack of preparation by the security forces and an inability to learn from past mistakes. Argentina’s first serious brush with revolutionary terrorism came more than a decade after Fidel Castro’s seizure of power in Cuba. The Argentines, who at all times are and were preoccupied with events at home, paid little attention to what was occurring throughout much of the hemisphere, where guerrilla-led insurrections were expected to take place in “tropical” countries but not in modern societies like that of European Argentina.

How badly prepared Argentina was to fight terrorism is clearly seen in the nature of its security forces. The police, both federal and provincial, were poorly educated and trained and badly equipped and led, with resulting low morale. All of this combined with minimum wages and low public opinion and respect to make the police forces in Argentina and elsewhere in the region both corrupt and incompetent. In many cases, these forces were and remain commanded by former military officers with no experience in legitimate police work. The police forces were (and still are) largely incapable of dealing with criminals and were always seen—as elsewhere in Latin America—as a first line of defense against civil disorder. In Argentina, that meant preventing the country’s labor unions from getting out of control during their frequent strikes and \textit{manifestaciones}, that is, noisy protest demonstrations.\textsuperscript{17}

But if the nation’s police lacked the ability to collect and analyze
intelligence and crime scene evidence, Argentina’s armed forces—army, navy, and air force—were no less well prepared for the onslaught of organized terrorism. Even as a conventional fighting force, the Argentine military lacked any semblance of competence in the twentieth century. For one thing, by 1970 it had not fought a war in a hundred years—other than seasonal expeditions aimed at the nation’s troublesome frontier Indians—despite chronic border disputes with its two most powerful neighbors, Brazil and Chile.18

To be sure, the Argentine armed forces—the army in particular—had no lack of theories about their role in society, a role that grew steadily in size until the Falklands disaster. Juan Perón as a relatively young officer, for example, wrote extensively on Argentina’s need for a well-trained force if it were to survive in the jungle of world politics. But that meant more than guns, tanks, and planes. Perón and his adherents argued that Argentina must transform itself from a nation with an agro-pastoral, export-minded economy into a highly industrialized country that could be nearly self-sufficient, especially in wartime. These ideas did not remain on the pages of military journals but in fact were transformed into policy in the 1940s and 1950s at heavy cost to Argentina’s economic health—a bill that Buenos Aires is still paying.

Exactly how unprepared the armed forces were can be judged from Argentina’s defeat in the Falklands War. On almost every level, that failure was manifest. In fact, the one major achievement of the Argentine military was obtaining the advantage of surprise. Neither the United States nor the United Kingdom appreciated what would happen in the South Atlantic until the eve of the invasion, and then, owing to distance, there was little London or Washington could do to prevent it other than deliver a last-minute warning from President Ronald Reagan to Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, the then junta chief, that the occupation of the islands by force would not be recognized by the United States or accepted by the British government without a fight and an all-out effort on the part of London to recover them.

President Reagan’s observations proved prescient—far more so than the Argentine high command’s ability to decipher British intentions and capabilities. First, the Argentines underestimated the enemy—a fatal mistake for anyone employing military force against an adversary. Second, once the islands were occupied, they had little ability to collect intelligence on the approaching forces. Third,
although Argentine Air Force pilots conducted operations with almost reckless courage, the bulk of the armed forces—mostly poorly motivated interior army conscripts—lacked the will to fight once the Royal Navy landed highly trained, thoroughly professional commandos and marines. Fourth, the armed forces had a difficult time properly coordinating the Falklands operation even from the beginning. After the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *Belgrano*, the navy, from the beginning the most belligerent of the services in the fight for the Falklands, withdrew from the fray, hoping to preserve its remaining capital of ships far from the scene of action.\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, if the Argentine armed forces could not wage a conventional war on their own ground properly, they could not wage a highly advantageous peace settlement either. In fact, before British forces arrived at and on the islands, Washington, working through President Belaúnde Terry of Peru, crafted a negotiated solution to the problem that Prime Minister Thatcher had accepted after much doubt and foot dragging. With U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig serving as a tireless interlocutor, the arrangement would have provided a gradual transfer of the Falklands to Argentina under the auspices of the United Nations. In fifteen years, the islands would have become the Malvinas in fact, and by now the Falklands would have become a distant memory.

It was not to happen. Why? Because the Argentine junta was fearful of taking yes for an answer. The junta members were intimidated because at the time they were afraid of their own troop commanders, who would accept nothing less than an immediate transfer of the islands and also held veto power over every decision of their nominal superiors. This perverse chain of command fully reveals the extent to which the Argentine military was an institution riven by faction and a lack of basic discipline. It would be no different in the security forces’ war against terrorism.\textsuperscript{20}

As for the Falklands campaign, that defeat, completed in mid-June 1982 when the Union Jack was once again hoisted over Port Stanley, was the beginning of the end of the military junta and marked the return to elected civilian rule under the Radical Party politician Raúl Alfonsín at the end of the following year. More important, defeat revealed the deeply flawed capabilities of the Argentine armed forces—considered at one time to have been the most professional in Latin America. But the loss to a determined
Margaret Thatcher (with considerable assistance from the United States) reveals only some of the Argentine inability to put together an effective security force aimed at either a conventional or unconventional armed foe, the latter bent on revolution, largely through indiscriminate terrorism.

HOW NOT TO WAGE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM:  
PART TWO

Although none of Argentina’s various insurgent groups ever came close to achieving victory or even one of its lesser goals—persuading a majority of Argentines, for example, that they were engaged in a legitimate attempt to seize power—the terrorists gained one important advantage. They succeeded in depriving the authorities of any moral advantage due to the government’s response to terrorism in kind until the moment sometime in 1979 when they were no longer capable of armed action. That failure on the part of Buenos Aires was multifaceted. But all these various failures resulted in Argentina conducting the kind of counterterrorism that helped buoy the terrorists for so long and for so dark a purpose.

What were these failures and how did they contribute to the discrediting of Argentina’s counterterrorist war? First, there was a failure of leadership. Second, there was a failure in intelligence, the most effective weapon against terrorism. Third, there was a failure in tactics and strategy. Finally, there was a failure to rely on legal procedures and humane methods in dealing with the illegal and manifestly inhumane.

The leadership failure, too, appeared in many ways. First, and foremost, Argentina’s political leadership in those years—from 1970 to 1983—was unstable and often short-lived, to say the least, and at best shakily legitimate. This was not a war to preserve constitutional democracy; it was only a war against terrorism. Compounding that problem, Argentina in less than fifteen years had no less than ten changes in heads of government, none of which were ever quite normal, constitutionally speaking. No less than seven military regimes sandwiched three civilian ones. Even the civilian governments were somewhat questionable in terms of legitimacy besides being outright failures at everything else. For example,
Héctor Cámpora, who was elected president in 1973 after seven years of military rule, was seen by everyone as a mere stand-in for Juan Perón, who remained in exile in Madrid during the election. But with Cámpora’s victory in March 1973 came the understanding that the loyal Peronist would resign and Perón himself would return to assume the presidential sash after a constitutionally dubious special election. Nevertheless, an increasingly desperate electorate welcomed the opportunity of having him back, given that Perón had won more than 60 percent of the vote in the September 1973 balloting. It was only a majority of Argentines who hoped the old leader would put things right; even the general’s ardent military critics believed that he alone could command the respect and provide the political cover necessary for its “to the death” struggle against terrorism.

To the satisfaction of the counterterrorists in the military and police, Perón initially proved to be a godsend. In one of his first acts in office, the new president outlawed the ERP and virtually declared war on the Montoneros. But Perón, then a man in his late seventies and in failing health when he returned from Spain for good, was well past his prime. His increasingly poor political judgment was most revealingly demonstrated by his insistence that his wife, Isabel, become Argentina’s vice president, a post she was manifestly unprepared for, as her twenty-one-month, disaster-prone presidency would prove after the death of her husband in July 1974. Isabel, in brief, was not his first wife, Evita, who had once hungered for the vice presidency but had been denied it by Argentina’s generals. Isabel’s emotional and physical collapse in office mirrored the crisis-wrecked state of Argentina, and by nearly universal consent the military moved once more into direct control of the nation’s affairs, a control they would retain for another seven years.21

Latin American militaries have a reputation, at times well earned for all their faults, for at least imposing stability on often unstable societies. Imposing law and order—or at least order—suggests that military governments themselves are strong in contrast to weak and wavering, not to mention ephemeral, civilian rule. After all, what else can soldiers with weapons be? It is simply in their nature. The Argentine experience in the 1970s, however, suggests something else. Neither Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía nor any of his immediate successors, generals Roberto Levingston or Alejandro Lanusse, was able
fully to impose his authority as Gen. Augusto Pinochet did in Chile after September 1973. Indeed, a student-led revolt in the provincial capital of Córdoba in 1969 was enough for Onganía to be deposed by his fellow military officers. In fact, all military presidents also served at the pleasure of the senior commanders, from Onganía to Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri. Their removal from office could be precipitated by single events—the Córdobazo in 1969 or the failure in the Falklands in 1982—or a general sense among the oficiales that the current officer-president had lost their confidence or in some cases the nation’s. In any case, leadership did not flow from the top down but rather the reverse. But that in effect meant no real leadership at all since the power wielders—troop commanders, in effect—were often divided themselves and often held their official positions for only brief periods of time before retirement or promotion.

Revolving door presidencies—military or civilian—with only two (Cámpora’s and then Perón’s) supported by the ballot box (the latter for another dozen years), suggest several related flaws that account for, in large part, Argentina’s inability to wage a just war against terrorism. First, weak and ephemeral leadership at the top meant that little could be expected in the way of a rational chain of command or accountability. Although nine Argentine military chiefs, including Jorge Videla, Roberto Viola, and Emilio Massera, were later tried and jailed during the Alfonsín administration for their part in waging the guerra sucia, to this day there is no certain knowledge of what they knew, what they ordered, or what was done in their names. In addition, it is not clear how much they chose not to know, thus skirting responsibility and accountability.

What is clear enough, however, is how fractured the security forces were as each arm of it—federal and provincial police, army, navy, and air force—carried out its own war, often a personal vendetta against those whom officers thought were killing brother officers and often enough members of their families. Whether any of this was coordinated is doubtful given the factional nature of these services and the secrecy with which they carried out their offensives against terrorists, real and imagined. Some services engaged in counterterrorism, of course, became better known—or more notorious—than others, although for years their existence was officially denied. The Argentine Navy and its New Mechanics School, ESMA, were among the most infamous, and suspects tortured and
murdered at the school were for the most part never identified. By some accounts, some five thousand individuals met that grisly end. The New Mechanics School and the navy were then under the command of Adm. Emilio Massera, who had long cultivated an image of political moderation, which fit well with the Argentine naval tradition of being pro-democracy—in contrast to the army, which had in the 1930s and 1940s flirted with fascism.24

Little by little the facts—but only some of them—have emerged. We have stories of those who were picked up—arrested implies some kind of legal process when often there was none—and disappeared forever. We have stories of victims flown to sea and dropped in the River Plate or the Atlantic Ocean by Argentine Navy personnel. We have accounts of men and women placed in prison without charge, left to languish, and then released with no explanation.25

What we have, in short, is almost everything but a coherent account of how to fight the evil of terrorism without engaging in the same practices. The inability to concentrate on the real criminals is another aspect of the terrible price exacted by the authorities. Thus, not only was the official response to terrorism fractured and uncoordinated, curbed by no sense of proper legal procedure, but it was pursued in a random, hit and miss way, suggesting that the security service had only a rough idea of what they were fighting.

This suggests that these services lacked the most basic tool of those asked to fight terrorism: intelligence, in every sense of the word. Again there is no proper documentation—itself a significant indicator of the problem. But the problem is apparent even to the less-experienced observer. The Argentine military and police over nearly twenty years never acquired the ability to collect, analyze, collate, and act upon accurate intelligence regarding the strengths and vulnerabilities of the groups they fought. They had a rough idea regarding the identity of the leaders but not the members. They could not distinguish—or didn’t care to—between the fighting cadre (which always proves to be a constantly changing group) and supporters and sympathizers. Indeed, the authorities seemed to be unable to distinguish between the supporters and sympathizers and the wholly innocent, prominent and obscure alike.

The lack of intelligence is evident on another aspect of fighting terrorism. The Argentine authorities, in fact, greatly exaggerated the fighting strength of their enemy. To be sure, bean counts, when
it comes to irregular warfare, are often off the mark—as the United States discovered in Central America, particularly in the early 1980s—but in the Argentine case the numbers were apparently wildly wrong. Instead of five hundred or so armed terrorists, Buenos Aires thought (or claimed) that it was battling twenty-five thousand. Of course, the terrorist groups themselves share part of the blame, as they exaggerated their numbers, but propaganda aside it is clear that the authorities had little idea as to how many they were actually battling in this guerra prolongada.26

The lack of intelligence (without which no antiterrorist program can succeed) was only one part of a broader failure of strategy and tactics. At its broadest level, the Argentine government and its various military governments from 1976 to 1983 talked incessantly about defending Western values, including democracy, but did little to exemplify those values themselves. At their most obvious, the various juntas never made a serious effort to restore civilian government through an election until the Falklands defeat deprived the military of its last shred of legitimacy. Instead, the armed forces (the army in particular) were determined to solve Argentina’s many problems with a hard hand and the firm smack of authority under their so-called National Reorganization Program. That they lacked an economic or political game plan was apparently beside the point. They severely undercut the legitimacy of their war by pursuing antidemocratic forces using antidemocratic means.27

If strategy failed, however, so did the government’s tactics. One glaring example will suffice. Along with intelligence, the most effective weapon against terrorists is the ability to infiltrate the various groups. That takes patience and skill, not to mention strong nerves mixed with a bit of luck. In the long battle against the Montoneros and the ERP, there is no evidence that either the police or the armed forces were able to do that, leaving them with the indiscriminate approach of sweeping up anybody and everybody who could possibly be a terrorist or terrorist supporter, with the judgment often left to the manifestly incompetent. On that point, the breakdown of the chain of command from top to bottom left armed men in (and out of) uniform ready and able to settle their own private scores under the guise of antiterrorism. After all, with no accountability and legal curbs, why not?

In Argentina, this was not just a theoretical possibility.
What would today’s Argentina look like if it had escaped the ravages of terrorism or at least the excesses of counterterrorism that occurred throughout the 1970s? The short answer is very different, indeed. Positing an alternate history of the Argentine Republic is nothing new. Domingo Cavallo, former foreign minister and then economics minister in the Menem government, and two of his colleagues, Roberto Domenech and Yair Mundlak, wrote an influential work in 1989—the year of Argentina’s economic collapse—a book entitled *The Argentina That Could Have Been* (La Argentina que pudo ser). In it, the authors describe in detail an Argentina that, had it followed sensible economic policies, would rank among the wealthiest of countries in per capita terms.

Cavallo and his collaborators first document the familiar belief that at the turn of the century Argentina, with its abundant natural resources and Europeanized population, was one of the planet’s most advanced countries, equaling Australia, Canada, and the United States, nations with similar expansive territories and growing populations. Its growth was not simply due to these factors, however, Cavallo and his coauthors argue. Rather it was because of Buenos Aires’ classically liberal economic policies put into practice in the mid-nineteenth century and followed scrupulously in the first part of the twentieth.28

Argentina’s economic decline began in 1930 when its governments, both military and civilian, replaced its export-oriented, low-tax, minimum-interventionist model with its opposite. They replaced wealth creation with a national security state in which the economy was directed to support the armed forces, just as it was in prewar Japan, Germany, and Italy (and the Soviet Union) instead of the other way around. Military defeat in World War II freed the Axis powers from this model, but Argentina until 1990—the same year in which communism fell—continued to impose capital controls, discourage foreign investment, punish agriculture with export taxes, force import substitution by protecting inefficient industries (often state-controlled), and impose high marginal tax rates to finance a federal budget that was out of control, say Cavallo, Domenech, and Mundlak.29

Only in the last decade has Argentina, under presidents Carlos
Saul Menem (a Peronist) and Fernando de la Rua (a Radical), changed course and allowed the country to recover (albeit slowly) from the ravages of dirigisme. The cost has been high, and much remains to be done—government budgets at the federal and provincial levels are not yet under complete control and tax policies prescribed by the International Monetary Fund remain, as they have always been, antigrowth—but Argentina in a decade or so could still join the family of mature economies provided that there are no major reversals in policy. So Cavallo and company showed in their work.

Economic well-being is important, but wealth creation and distribution is not enough. Argentine governments for eight decades presided over a once-rich economy and ran it into the ground. For nearly two decades, it fought the terrorist fire with counterterrorist fire and largely destroyed the already fragile fabric of Argentine society along with the terrorists, factors that economists like Cavallo rarely consider. This has meant that Argentina remains a polarized society with the question of the “disappeared” still on the agenda. It is almost certain that the bulk of those responsible will never be brought to trial or before a South African–style truth commission. Nor is it clear that they could be—such is the nature of a secret war. This means that Argentina’s political wounds can never heal as long as any part of the population has a living memory of these events. That, too, only reinforces cynicism about politics, politicians, and the nature of legal justice. It also gives a weapon to what remains of the Argentine Left—albeit a nonviolent one that can turn a legitimate issue of responsibility and legal safeguards into a potent weapon against any government that may be following an economically liberal course but cannot or will not meet the demands of the moment.

The Argentina that could have been may not have escaped from all the political problems that the country has encountered but never resolved in this century. But it would have been free of a past that has been poisoned by the guerra sucia, not to mention sparing thousands of lives and the hundreds of thousands who were indirectly affected by the atrocities committed on both sides. Argentina, without the terror and counterterror it generated, would have made civilian government more stable and kept the military in the barracks at an earlier date. Perhaps, and even more likely, the
Falklands War would have been avoided as well. The Argentina that might have been can only have been a vast improvement over the Argentina that was and is.

CONCLUSION

Argentina’s bitter experience with terrorism and its equally terrible twin, maladroit counterterrorism, should provide a useful warning for Argentines or anyone concerned with the first question of politics: how to ensure order but not at any cost. Terrorism does not simply happen in poor and benighted societies. It can happen anywhere, as Italy, Spain, and Argentina have proved. Although a society may be relatively wealthy and well educated, it only takes a few to cause mayhem. That mayhem is magnified when security officials and their leaders (elected or otherwise) do not have the tools to combat the terrorists surgically rather than taking a “round up the usual suspects” and take no prisoners approach. To be sure, the war eventually can be won, but at what cost? In Argentina, to this very day, the peace has yet to be won.

This raises the troubling question, could it happen again? The likelihood of a Marxist-based insurgency may be dubious, but it is not impossible. Terrorism is and always has been a hydra-headed monster. Its sponsors can come from any part of the ideological spectrum or from any part of the world. The two bombings in recent years aimed at Jewish institutions in Argentina are a reminder of that. Violent crime with terrorist overtones is on the rise in Argentina, and the police seem no more capable of combating it than in the past when terror was overtly political. One reason for this is that the criminals are often part of the state security services. The authorities’ inability to find the perpetrators, in short, shows how ill equipped the Argentine state is in combating terrorism. Ironically—or, more precisely, tragically—the inability to come to terms with its past has led to paralysis in fashioning an effective, legally bound, counterterrorist capability. Meanwhile, Argentina’s political and legal structures seem no better equipped to withstand an all-out assault of terror and counterterror than they did twenty years ago.
THE SEPTEMBER 11 TERRORIST disaster has had very little impact on Argentina despite its history of homegrown terrorism. The reasons for this are varied and throw considerable light on Argentina as a nation and a people.

First, Argentina remains, for all its European trappings, an insular society preoccupied with its own concerns. Moreover, it has never been, even in the Menem years or on the whole, particularly close to the United States—and that is an understatement. Argentine leaders since the turn of the twentieth century have seen their country as a rival to the United States, not a partner in any common endeavor. More than a century later, little has changed. According to well-informed observers, little empathy was shown in Argentina for Americans after the September 11 loss of three thousand largely civilian lives. Indeed, within the country’s elite, including the military, there was a suggestion that somehow the United States had brought the disaster on itself and the Bush administration would either show little or no resolution in hunting down and destroying the perpetrators or would strike out blindly against the entire Muslim world.

Since the fall of Fernando de la Rua’s government and the establishment of Eduardo Duhalde’s presidency, that sense of schadenfreude and indifference about America’s terrorist problem has only increased in the River Plate Republic. Ordinary Argentines, besieged by grinding daily economic uncertainty and sudden impoverishment, have no time for or interest in foreign terrorism. Nor does the new Duhalde government, an untested regime that fairly breathes an old-fashioned Peronist xenophobia.

As Argentina plunges further into economic and political chaos, that operational indifference to September 11 will no doubt remain the case. Moreover, even if the Duhalde government or any of its eventual successors were to do more than extend an obligatory expression of concern about terrorism it would not be supported by many Argentines, who have learned to revile their entire political class, often with good reason.

The roots of Argentina’s failure run deep into the country’s history and need not detain us for long. Still, the recent shocks of recession and national bankruptcy have proved particularly painful
for a nation perpetually at war with itself. Argentines have long been preoccupied with their own internal problems—primarily economic but also political—which in the last year have sparked the worst crisis since mid-1989. At that time, inflation went into overdrive, with prices doubling every month and no end then in sight. Many fear it will happen again—and it could. At the beginning of 2002, Argentines had seen their government collapse with the sudden, unexpected resignation of President De la Rua after food riots had broken out in Argentina’s largest cities.

This time, however, De la Rua was not forced out by the military, much less a political cabal, but only because of the pressures of the job, whose responsibilities he so clearly was unable to shoulder. De la Rua, the second failed Radical president in little more than a decade, presided over a two-year presidency that turned difficult but surmountable economic difficulties into a world-class crisis sparking national insolvency, deepening recession, and possible hyperinflation, not to mention panic in the streets.

De la Rua’s ruined presidency was succeeded in rapid-fire fashion by several provisional governments headed by political lightweights, one of them a former governor of one of Argentina’s lesser provinces who proposed that the solution to the nation’s problems lay in yet another currency. He in turn was succeeded by former senator Eduardo Duhalde, whose new administration is supposed to last two years, after which time new elections are to take place. Few analysts believe that will happen given the size and difficulty of Argentina’s economic problems. Historically, Argentina’s temporary governments of the day have nearly always lacked authority and decisiveness or even a clue as to an effective policy. As a consequence, a more permanent government may be years, certainly months, in the future.

If conditions continue to deteriorate radically—and they probably will—the military, reluctantly but eventually, could be forced to step in, although it is discredited, has a poor record in managing the economy, and would in doing so most likely spark a violent reaction. The high command is well aware of its limitations. During the rioting of last December and January, the military high command made it clear to the civilian authorities that it would not intervene to prevent looting and rioting since it was not equipped to do so short of using lethal force. In this milieu, then, with no end in
sight or painless solution available, we must place what the Argen-
tine government has said so far about the events of September 11.

Finally, it would be unfair to suggest that the De la Rua govern-
ment did not respond at all to the attacks on New York and Wash-
ington, D.C. It did. But whether commitments made to combat Is-
lamic fundamentalist terrorism will be sustained by any succeeding
Argentine government remains very much to be seen. On the diplo-
matic grace note level, then, President De la Rua and his govern-
ment’s representatives in the Foreign Ministry and Argentina’s mis-
sions to the Organization of American States and the United Nations
made repeated statements of support for America’s stand against
terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Moreover, that government further pledged its cooperation in
pursuing an investigation of alleged Hizbullah activity in the so-
called tri-border area that connects Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.
How much De la Rua’s successors will be willing to cooperate on
this issue also remains very much to be seen. The Paraguayan bor-
der area in particular has long been considered virtually lawless,
and many suspect that Lebanese Hizbullah used it as a base for
their terror attacks on the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community
center in Buenos Aires.

This raises a final ambiguity about the Argentine position on ter-
rorism. The De la Rua government pledged in the spirit of his pre-
deccessor, Carlos Saul Menem, to cooperate with the United States
and the United Nations in committing a battalion of Argentine
peacekeepers to Afghanistan under the command of the British.
That surely is an irony in view of the 1982 war over the
Falkland/Malvinas Islands. Nevertheless, the De la Rua promise of
six hundred men, a pledge that attracted harsh criticism within the
Argentine Congress as being unconstitutional when it was first pro-
posed last December, will be difficult to sustain in the present at-
mosphere of economic uncertainty, tight budgets, and political tur-
moil. And that is quite aside from the problem of a more
nationalistic Duhalde government simply ignoring the pledge of a
discredited predecessor.

Thus, the degree, if any, to which an Argentine government can
be concerned with international commitments remains highly un-
certain. Only time will tell, and in this case it may well be a very
long time.