

UNDER COVER

Paying the Price

Whatever the result of the conflict over the Falkland Islands, American diplomacy has been disgraceful. Our leaders have managed to suggest that we are well meaning, amiably sympathetic to both sides, but ineffectual, unable to find an acceptable solution or to impose a just one. All this from an administration that vowed to restore our prestige and our sense of potency in world politics.

In fact, we are not as feeble as our policy makes us seem. Our weakness is moral, not material; the body politic is healthy but the Reagan administration's spirit is sick. The Falkland crisis would not have developed or festered if the administration had been willing to do what is just, to support Great Britain to the limit of our power.

Argentina's claims to the Falklands are frivolous. They rest on geographic proximity and the ancient possession of the islands by the Spanish Crown. On the same basis Sweden has a better claim to Finland: Finland was wrested from Sweden by czarist imperialism; the Swedish Crown still exists; and Finland is certainly near enough. The Finns, of course, need not be consulted any more than Argentina asked permission from the Falklanders. As Anthony Lewis pointed out in the *New York Times*, anyone who believes that Argentina has a case would have been bound, in logic, to respect the Nazi demand for the Sudetenland.

Argentina, of course, has always maintained its claim to the Falklands, and Argentine governments, in trouble at home, have periodically blustered about the issue. Lord Carrington's relative complacency must have derived from this record. He could not believe that this Argentine government, unlike its predecessors, would carry out its menaces and appeal to arms.

The Argentine dictators, however, had new cause for daring. They had reason to believe that the United States would not support its British allies or would do so only halfheartedly. Militarily, the Argentines took a hard line because they believed that British forces were not strong enough to obtain a quick, decisive victory and because they hoped that Britain would not be able to sustain a long, costly conflict in the South Atlantic. Would they have taken the same position if the U.S. had made it clear that in the event of an armed conflict American forces would support the British if requested to do so? It is to smile. Would Argentina, in fact, have seized the Falklands at all unless some American official, seeking to ingratiate us with the Argentine dictators, expressed some muddled sympathy for Argentina's claims? After the islands were seized, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick justified her attendance at an Argentine diplomatic dinner by just such a statement, and it

seems likely that something of the sort was also said before the event.

Why have we been so eager for friendship and social pleasantries with the Argentine junta? Primarily, because the administration regards anticommunism as the first principle of foreign policy. Reagan and his advisors admire the Argentine regime because they believe that the generals share this view. After all, the Argentines have been ready for military measures against revolutionary regimes in this Hemisphere. Perhaps the Argentine leaders *do* see the East-West conflict as the most important fact in world politics, but that does not mean that the Argentines share Reagan's view of the world.

The United States is responsible for containing the Soviet Union; no one else can do the job. The more militant our anticommunism, the more we must subordinate other goals to this main task. Our role as a superpower, however, allows *other* regimes to be less responsible. The tougher we are with the Russians, the more an anti-Communist government like Argentina's feels safe in pursuing other concerns. Given Reagan's cold warriorism, Argentina can even afford a kind of warmth in its relations with the USSR. Argentina always has had common interests with the Russians; the generals did not let ideology keep them from selling wheat to the Soviet Union during the U.S. grain embargo, and the USSR is reciprocating by trying to take up the slack left by the Common Market's ban on imports from Argentina. The Soviet Union, apparently, let the Argentines believe that it would veto any Security Council resolution condemning an invasion of the Falklands. Although the Soviet Union did not carry out its implied promise, preferring mischief, it seems to be spying on the British for the Argentines. One man's anticommunism, it appears, is another's fellow traveling.

The administration must learn to recognize that its own ideological zeal does not necessarily strengthen anticommunism abroad. American militancy permits other regimes to relax their own, especially if they suspect we will treat justice as less important than anti-Communist protestations. An old wisdom reminds us that justice is the true balance of political life, and those who tilt the scales pay a price. In the Falkland Islands we are paying that price and it is too high for the things we revere. Lord Carrington resigned for a smaller blunder. What a pity that the knaves in Washington lack the self-respect to follow his dignified example.

Wilbur Cary McWilliams