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Lessons from a little war

We are at last learning the details of how Argentina embarked on the disastrous 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands. This intriguing story, pieced together from articles and interviews with Argentine analysts, is both tragic and comical.

According to these sources, the real decision-making power in Buenos Aires was held by the civilian ministry of finance rather than the military junta whose bemedalled generals were not allowed to meddle in the economy or foreign affairs.

After decades of economic debauchery, Argentina was on the verge of bankruptcy. Inflation was running at 300% annually and there was a whiff of revolution in the air. Argentina's civilian leaders then hit on a plan to invade the Falklands as a means of diverting public attention and perhaps as a way of repudiating the nation's enormous foreign debt, 80% of which was held by England.

During the winter of 1982, the political leaders in Buenos Aires decided to invade the Falklands with only a token force of a few hundred marines. Then events took up their own "opera bouffe" momentum:

The Argentines asked American Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, for U.S. support. Haig, a man who had great difficulty with both foreign affairs and the English language, left the Latins with the impression that Washington approved.

Argentina planned to invade in September; but, in June, a group of local scrap dealers landed in South Georgia Island, raised the national flag and got run off by the British. Greatly alarmed, the ministry of finance urged an immediate invasion.

General consternation

An ill-prepared expeditionary force of marines was assembled. But then the generals and admirals of the junta, who had apparently been kept largely in the dark, became outraged. The army demanded the leading role in "this epic day in Argentina's history."

Not to be outdone by their rival service, the air force and navy also demanded a starring role. What was to have been a minor political act suddenly became a full-scale invasion.

Of course, no one expected the British, long dithering over the future of the Falklands, to react with military force. To make matters worse, just as the first Argentine troops were landing, U.S. President Ronald Reagan phoned the junta and told them bluntly to get out. Consternation in Buenos Aires was intense.

Argentina's military forces were utterly unprepared for the war. The garrison in the Falklands, short of food, warm clothing, ammunition and support from air and naval forces, was never intended to fight, only to serve as a bargaining chip. The Argentinian leaders were so certain that the British would negotiate they placed an intelligence officer in charge of the Falklands' defences.

As the British armada approached the Falklands, the Argentines put on a brave face, but in Buenos Aires deep dissension broke out between the civilian and military leaders, each of whom blamed the other for this fiasco. In spite of the bravery of Argentina's air force pilots, it soon became evident that the Falklands garrison was cut off and trapped.

Now, instead of demanding a place in the vanguard, the three military service leaders sought to blame the others for this mess. The army blamed the navy for causing its troops to be cut off; the navy blamed the air force for failing to win air superiority; and the air force blamed everybody.

Soviet cold shoulder

The Argentines, desperate for help, reportedly turned to the Russians. But the Soviets were erroneously convinced that a deal had already been made between London, Washington and Buenos Aires — they refused any major assistance. Expected help from the rest of Latin America turned out to be largely verbal.

After the humiliating failure of the invasion, public wrath in Argentina was vented against the hapless military officers. The heads of the air force and navy resigned and the junta leader, Gen. Galtieri, still remains under house arrest. On top of all this, Argentina found itself unable to repudiate its debt to England and was forced to abjectly renegotiate its loans.

This comedy of errors was extremely expensive in lives and treasure to both England and Argentina. It represented perhaps the last manifestation of the grandiose and illusory dreams of the late Juan Peron, Argentina's home-grown Mussolini.

Today, Argentina is facing a major national election which may mark the end of its era of bombastic nationalism and fiscal dementia — or the beginning of a long period of accelerating political turmoil.

We can observe some important lessons from the little war in the icy waters of the south Atlantic. Nations that launch wars for reasons of national honor or prestige usually end up bitter, disillusioned and bankrupt. Wars aimed at diverting public opinion from economic problems often result in even worse financial trouble. And, as Hitler found out, political leaders should never start a war before their military forces are truly ready.

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