

Between Confrontation and Accommodation: Military and Government Policy in Democratic Argentina*

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After a prolonged period of authoritarian rule, the rebirth of democracy in Latin America has prompted a resurgent interest in civilian control of the armed forces. Few disagree that political leaders will be unable to consolidate their democratic gains without resolving 'la cuestión militar'. Given the history of military political intervention in the region, scholars have long expressed scepticism over whether governments can ever fully subject the armed forces to their political will. Recently, the terms on which power has been transferred from military to civilian hands and developments subsequent to the transfer have prompted an even greater anxiety about the future of some of these new and fragile democracies.¹

Constraints imposed by authoritarian regimes and by the transition process itself in Brazil, Ecuador and Chile have given the armed forces considerable influence over those nascent democratic governments. Political developments after the transition process have enabled the military to control internal security (Peru), obstruct judicial proceedings (Uruguay and Argentina), and cancel social and agrarian reforms and

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¹ A number of authors have expressed doubts about the capacity of several new democracies to overcome important obstacles to consolidation and civilian control. For an overview of conditions in South America as a whole, see Felipe Agüero, 'The Military and the Limits to Democratization in South America', in Scott Mainwaring et al. (eds.), *The New Democracies in Latin America: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (Notre Dame, forthcoming). In Brazil, Guillermo O'Donnell sees a gradual erosion of democratic practice as a result of harmful 'institutional carryovers' from the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime. See Guillermo O'Donnell, 'Challenges to Democratization in Brazil', *World Policy*, vol. 5 (Spring 1988), pp. 281–300. On obstacles to change in Peru, see Marcial Rubio Correa, 'The Armed Forces in Peruvian Politics', in Augusto Varas (ed.), *Democracy Under Siege: New Military Power in Latin America* (New York, 1989).

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appoint active officers to cabinet level positions (Brazil). These conditions have so narrowed the margin of policy freedom for civilians as to suggest that political leaders may have become irrevocably 'trapped' by the historical, political and economic conditions in which they have found themselves. Rather than establish their supremacy over the armed forces, they shackle themselves by inventing avoidance or appeasement strategies that mollify disgruntled officers but weaken their authority.²

If the parameters are so confining, then they render superfluous the study of political engineering skills that leaders could theoretically employ in their quest for civilian supremacy. Inquiries into decision-making would be hampered because leaders caught in a politically untenable situation could not be expected to consider rational policy alternatives beyond their reach. Indeed, while civil-military affairs have been brought into sharper focus in the literature on Latin America,³ little attention has been paid to the tactical dimensions which underlie military policies of state.⁴

However, it is precisely the aforementioned factors that make the study of political tactics both necessary and appealing in the Argentine case. In the post-authoritarian era, constraints and opportunities have balanced themselves out in a manner not found in decades past or in other country settings. The political and economic failures of the *Proceso* government (1976–83) combined with the cataclysmic effects of the Malvinas War eroded much (though not all) of the military's power. Conversely, the new Alfonsín government assumed office with an impressive electoral mandate and irreproachable moral authority that strengthened its position

² On these strategies in the Brazilian case, see David Pion-Berlin and Paul Buchanan, 'Civil-Military "Games" and Democratic Consolidation: A Comparative Analysis of Argentina, Brazil and Greece', paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 1988, pp. 26–36.

³ The transitions to democracy have prompted scholars to focus on the logical prerequisites for civilian control. See A. Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton, 1987); C. Welch Jr., *Civilian Control of the Military* (New York, 1976); C. Welch Jr., *No Farewell to Arms?* (Boulder, 1987); J. Samuel Fitch, 'Military Professionalism, National Security and Democracy: Lessons from the Latin American Experience', *Pacific Focus*, vol. 6 (1989), pp. 99–147; T. Maniruzzaman, *Military Withdrawal from Politics: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1987); L. W. Goodman, et al. (eds.), *The Military and Democracy: The Future of Civil-Military Relations in Latin America* (Lexington, 1990).

⁴ In their volume on *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, O'Donnell and Schmitter do consider tactical calculations in the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. The focus of my investigation, however, is on the tactics employed by civilians to subordinate the armed forces once the transition has been completed. See G. O'Donnell and P. C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, 1986); for a study that underlines the crucial importance of tactics in politics, see W. Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 303–20.

considerably.⁵ Scholars have argued that such transitions, characterised by authoritarian collapse and civilian renewal, provide incumbents with a freer hand in shaping relations with the armed forces.⁶ Military power during the Alfonsín years was never so great as to deny the government real options on the one hand, or so weak as to make civilian supremacy a foregone conclusion on the other. Hence, Argentina should serve as a meaningful case for appraising the decision-making skills of democratic leaders.

The subject of this study is the military policy of the Argentine government of Dr Raúl Alfonsín, from 1983–9. Civil–military interaction during the Alfonsín period can best be described as an unstable equilibrium, characterised by a general political calm punctuated by periodic outbursts of defiance, violence and open rebellion. While relations were clearly not as contentious as in years past, neither were they distinctly cooperative.⁷ Military and civilian elites confronted each other in a zero sum environment that was much their own creation, resulting in settlements which left one side relatively satisfied and the other aggrieved.

I will demonstrate how the government's political tactics and the military reactions to these helped shape this unstable equilibrium. Specifically it will be argued that while many of Alfonsín's proposals helped to establish civilian control, the manner in which these were presented, linked and sequenced often harmed relations with the armed forces. With the balance of forces initially in his favour, President Alfonsín overwhelmed his military rivals with a set of prolonged, simultaneous and punitive measures. Alone, these penalties were not excessive, but combined over time they were, having both positive and negative repercussions. On the one hand, they reduced the military's political sphere of influence to levels more compatible with the constitutional order. On the other hand, they left the armed forces in a professionally moribund state, creating a store of resentment against the government that would later be summoned in acts of defiance.

⁵ The Radicals were able to widen significantly their electoral base of support, thanks largely to Alfonsín's political 'presence'. See Marcelo Cavarozzi, 'Political Cycles in Argentina Since 1955', in O'Donnell et al. (ed.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*, p. 47.

⁶ On transition through collapse, see Constantine Danopoulos, 'From Military to Civilian Rule in Contemporary Greece', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 10 (1984), pp. 229–50; David Pion-Berlin, 'The Fall of Military Rule in Argentina: 1976–1983', *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 27 (1985), pp. 55–76. The effect of the Argentine transition on the balance of power between the armed forces and the new democratic leadership has been well documented. See Andrés Fontana, 'Fuerzas Armadas, Partidos Políticos y Transición a la Democracia en Argentina, 1981–1982', Kellogg Institute Working Paper 28 (July 1984), pp. 29–32, and by the same author, 'La Política Militar del Gobierno Constitucional Argentino', *CEDES* (July 1987), p. 6.

⁷ See Ernesto López, *El Último Levantamiento* (Buenos Aires, 1988).

The article will proceed as follows. First, some theoretical aspects of civilian control will be discussed. Then, historical background to the period under review will be provided through an examination of the failures of the *Proceso* military government. Afterwards, the Alfonsín government's military policy will be disaggregated into three components: the military budget and its relation to the tasks of reorganisation and military mission; support for judicial proceedings against human rights offenders within the officer corps; and the drafting of a new defence law. For each, I will (1) identify and evaluate the critical decisions that were made, (2) discuss the consequences of policy and (3) determine the policy constraints. Concluding remarks will follow.

Civilian control: its strategic and tactical dimensions

In its simplest form, civilian control (or supremacy) represents a distribution of power whereby the armed forces submit to the political will of the authorities. There is no measurable ceiling of military strength below which civilian supremacy would be ensured, and power asymmetries will no doubt vary from context to context. But, as Huntington argues, the political power of the incumbents must be maximised while that of the military minimised at least to a level consistent with the cultivation of professional attitudes and behaviour among the officer corps so that support for civilian authority becomes unconditional.⁸ Only when the armed forces are prepared to 'carry out the wishes of any civilian group which secures legitimate authority within the state', will the military fall under objective civilian control, according to Huntington.⁹

Civilians do not have a sword of Damocles to dangle over the heads of the military to compel its submission: subordination must be accepted. In this respect, civilian supremacy is a form of power through consent. Acceptance of new and uncertain patterns of authority will usually be forthcoming if there is underlying confidence that democratic rules of behaviour will not grant unfair advantages to civilians or cause undue

⁸ Although Samuel Huntington argued that the armed forces would have to become politically inert to safeguard their professional standards, other scholars contend that military professionals – particularly in the developing countries – remain politically active. See B. Abrahamsson, *Military Professionalisation and Political Power* (Beverly Hills, 1972); and Guillermo O'Donnell, 'Modernisation and Military Coups: Theory, Comparisons and the Argentine Case', in Abraham Lowenthal and J. Samuel Fitch (eds.), *Armies and Politics in Latin America: Revised Edition* (New York, 1986), pp. 133–96. Claude Welch acknowledges that civilians cannot entirely banish Third World military institutions from politics. Moreover, the dichotomy between military intervention and the Huntingtonian notion of civilian control 'neglects a major area of interactions', which he calls military 'participation' in politics: see *No Farewell to Arms*, p. 13.

⁹ See S. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 84.

harm to the military institution. It is often a perceived threat to corporate wellbeing that precedes military intervention.¹⁰ Paradoxically, even as they attempt to reduce the perceived threat to corporate interests, the democratic leaders must divest the military of numerous privileges it enjoyed under authoritarian rule if civilian control is to be realised.

The military's capacity to adjust to a reduced role hinges, in part, on its willingness to revamp its political thinking. The discovery (or rediscovery) of less politicised norms of professionalism compatible with the democratic order and the modification of antiquated views of national security are prerequisites for subordinate behaviour.¹¹ Without a fundamental reshaping of attitudes about security, the military, as self-proclaimed guardians of national welfare, will meddle in political and social affairs in search of 'enemies of state'. Such activities inevitably violate civil-military boundaries in a democratic society, making it difficult for the armed forces to accept a reduced sphere of influence.

It is unrealistic to presume that such a change will occur at the behest of the armed forces. Should civilians not provide innovative direction in establishing new norms of military professionalism, then military subordination is unlikely to occur.¹² Difficult conceptual reformulations could be made more palatable to the armed forces were political elites to enter into a series of exchanges with their military counterparts. Latitude on one issue could be offset by restraint on others. Conceivably, civilians could grant the military limited autonomy over recruitment, promotions, education, etc., in exchange for uncontested and wider spheres of influence of their own; normalise military participation in defence-related agencies of state while limiting such participation to non-deliberative functions; and trade material privileges for unquestioned military respect for budgetary allocations. In theory, these exchanges would preserve or even augment the military's sense of professional exclusivity while simultaneously narrowing its prerogatives.¹³ The more thoroughly pro-

¹⁰ Martin Needler, 'Military Motivations in the Seizure of Power', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 10 (1975), pp. 63–79.

¹¹ A leading proponent of this view is J. Samuel Fitch. See his article, 'Military Professionalism', p. 140. Others who share this view are David Pion-Berlin, 'Latin American National Security Doctrines: Hard- and Softline Themes', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 15 (Spring 1989), pp. 411–29; Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics*; Welch, *No Farewell to Arms*; Agüero 'The Military and the Limits to Democratization'.

¹² Stepan makes the strongest case for civil society, political society and the state to prove their expertise in defence-related areas. See *Rethinking Military Politics*, pp. 128–45; also see J. Samuel Fitch, 'The Armed Forces and Democracy in Latin America', Discussion Paper Prepared for the Plenary Session of the Inter-American Dialogue, 16–18 October 1987.

¹³ In this respect, there would be a reversal of the phenomena of professional intervention which O'Donnell accurately depicted during previous decades. Then, a heightened sense of professionalism spurred the military to intervene against democratically

fessionalised the institution, the more functionally specific its tasks, and hence the less perilous it becomes for civilians to grant the military spheres of autonomy.¹⁴ In this respect, limited military autonomy and civilian political supremacy over the armed forces are not incompatible goals.

As depicted, reciprocity is a cooperative strategy which democratic governments could deploy to win military allegiance to civilian rule. But the manner in which this strategy is executed can have a crucial bearing upon how well it is received by the armed forces.¹⁵ For example, governments that wish to reward compliance with professional incentives cannot succeed by conceding too much since they run the risk of being perceived as vulnerable. If they are too quick to mollify military dissension with material concessions and enlarged privileges, they may foster the impression of weakness and encourage more adventurous, even insubordinate, forms of behaviour. Rather than increasing the benefits of compliance, political leaders may raise the costs of military defiance. Here too, proper execution is critical. In disciplining the armed forces, civilians must be careful not to thrust change upon them too hastily lest they invite retaliation. Policies that are perceived to be too punitive to the military because they are imposed without countervailing rewards may heighten rather than soothe fears about civilian control.

Consider the problem of policy sequence and calibration. Leaders (such as Raúl Alfonsín) who can draw on large sums of political capital immediately following the transition from authoritarian rule sense an

elected governments because of the close association between role expansion and guardianship over national security on the one hand, and institutional cohesion and advancement on the other. See O'Donnell, 'Modernization and Military Coups', pp. 96–133.

¹⁴ On the importance of establishing boundaries between military and non-military functions, see R. Luckman, 'A Comparative Typology of Civil–Military Relations', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 6 (1971), pp. 5–35.

¹⁵ Classic studies of civil–military relations confirm that tactical blunders have been quite damaging to civilian authority. Argentine president Arturo Frondizi's (1958–62) refusal to suppress a military uprising and instead to negotiate with the rebel leader '... lowered his own prestige as constitutional commander-in-chief of the armed forces and invited further invasions of his own authority', according to R. Potash, *The Army and Politics in Argentina, 1945–1962* (Stanford, 1980), p. 317. Errors in tactical judgement on the part of Brazilian president João Goulart (1961–4) helped to crystallise putschist elements inside the military and hastened his own demise. See A. Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton, 1971). Conversely, studies of older democratic orders have shown how political finesse has been used to prolong the lifespan of otherwise fragile governments. For example, Venezuelan president Rómulo Betancourt (1958–64) was able to strike a balance between firmness and conciliation in winning military respect for civilian authority. See R. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt and the Transformation of Venezuela* (New Brunswick, 1982), pp. 465–501.

urgent need to accomplish all that they can in the short term, fearing that the balance of power may turn against them later on. But an inundation of reforms may overwhelm the military and cause resentment. In some instances, the best course of action may be to stagger costly measures; in other instances, to wait and do nothing. At a minimum, each policy must be properly gauged so that it is neither excessive nor deficient with respect to its objectives. In short, the political class must navigate the treacherous waters between the Scylla of excessive domination and the Charybdis of total acquiescence.

These are decisions that are made within the constraints of economics, politics, ideology and history. The availability of economic resources will either widen or narrow the policy choices for government. The political arena in which a decision is made – be it executive, legislative, judicial, or public – could either advance or impede the implementation of policy. Insofar as military and political leaders alike have strong ideological inclinations, subjective factors may form contextual barriers as well. Beliefs act as filtering devices, screening out certain options while permitting others. Thus what decision makers ‘see’ is what they act upon.¹⁶ Finally, the political class must contend with historical antecedents, because past practices often guide current actions. If, as in the Argentine case, the tradition of military intervention is deeply embedded in politics, it will be more difficult for civilians to establish new patterns of behaviour.¹⁷ However, where public repugnance over previous authoritarian practices is great, new democratic regimes may find that they can draw initially upon a huge store of legitimacy that can be turned against praetorian-minded officers. The failures of the Argentine military *Proceso* government provided the democratic incumbents with just this supply of political capital.

The Proceso's legacy and the foundations for civilian control

Circumstances preceding the transfer of authority to democratic incumbents influence the initial distribution of power between the military and civilians.¹⁸ A relatively strong performance by the previous regime will

¹⁶ The literature linking beliefs, cognition and political behaviour is rich. Two of the classic studies are Alexander George, ‘The “Operational Code”: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making’, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13 (June 1969), pp. 190–222; and Ole Holsti, ‘The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 6 (1962), pp. 244–52.

¹⁷ See A. Rouquié, ‘Demilitarization and the Institutionalization of Military-Dominated Politics in Latin America’, in Lowenthal and Fitch (eds.), *Armies and Politics in Latin America*, pp. 444–77.

¹⁸ On the relation between regime type and the distribution of power, see Felipe Agüero, ‘The Assertion of Civilian Supremacy in Post-Authoritarian Contexts: Spain in Comparative Perspective’, PhD diss., Duke University, 1991; on the linkage between

allow the armed forces to exit confidently, imposing limits on the new democratic leaders. Moreover, the new civilian government will be pressured to perform well since it will be held to the higher standards achieved by its predecessor. Conversely, if the armed forces have failed to perform competently they are likely to leave office disunited, demoralised, and incapable of dictating terms to the new democratic leaders. In that case, civilians will not be taken to task in the short term for performance setbacks, while even modest improvements will be seen as welcome signs of relief from autocratic rule.

In Argentina, the failures of the self-styled *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (PRN or *Proceso*) were still fresh in the minds of most Argentines when President Alfonsín assumed the reins of power in December 1983. The military junta had presided over a ruined economy, turned a limited counter-insurgency operation into a wholesale slaughter of innocent civilians, and gone down to defeat at the hands of the British in a war they themselves had precipitated.¹⁹ A loss of faith in programmatic objectives, and the re-emergence of personal and ideological cleavages within the ranks of the military contributed significantly to the regime's hasty demise. Torn by conflict and self doubt, the armed forces made only half-hearted and unsuccessful attempts to control events during the interregnum. Widespread, public disdain for the dictatorship contributed to the military's demise and to greater acceptance of the newly elected government. By the time the military surrendered complete control of the state at the end of 1983, the balance of power had shifted decisively in favour of President Alfonsín.

There were economic, social and political dimensions to this shift in power. The most serious economic indictment of the *Proceso* was that it had been unable to show significant improvements even on indicators it – rather than its critics – considered to be crucial. First among these were rates of inflation and governmental deficits. Inflation, which had been hovering between 100 and 150% for several years, jumped to 343% in 1983, the last year of military rule. Price volatility seriously undercut the government's efforts to stimulate productive growth or lure foreign

the performance of the previous regime and the distribution of power, see O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies*, p. 20.

¹⁹ The best accounts of the *Proceso*'s failures can be found in P. Waldmann and E. G. Valdéz (eds.), *El Poder Militar en la Argentina: 1976–1981* (Buenos Aires, 1983); J. Schvarzer, *Martínez de Hoz: La Lógica Política de la Política Económica*, Centro de Investigaciones Sociales Sobre el Estado y la Administración, Ensayos y Tesis 4 (Buenos Aires, 1983); W. C. Smith, *Authoritarianism and the Crisis of the Argentine Political Economy* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 224–66.

investors back to Argentina. The public sector deficits under military rule, which contributed to inflation and to the general economic malaise, were unprecedented, reaching 15 % of GDP during the 1980–2 period, compared to 9 % during the worst moments of the Peronist presidency from 1974 to 1976.²⁰ These poor economic trends continued into the first 18 months of the Alfonsín administration, but were easily attributable to the errors of the military dictatorship and its economic czar, Dr José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz.

The economic crisis suffered under military rule had profound social consequences for Argentina. As industries folded, blue collar workers were suddenly forced out of work and thrust into the economy's unofficial, non-unionised sectors. The 'de-industrialisation' of Argentina narrowed the social base of trade unionism and weakened its organisational grip on the working class.²¹ Consequently, although the living standards of the work force were declining under Alfonsín, Peronist-led national strikes and protests were not as well attended as before and had a less disruptive affect on the government. In fact, many labour leaders, recognising that there was considerable public approval for the anti-inflationary *Plan Austral* in 1985, urged restraint among their followers while joining in three-sided discussions (along with government and business) called by Alfonsín designed to smooth the passage of his economic plan.²²

The political context had changed as well. Public repudiation of the armed forces was deep and widespread, acting as a barrier against civil–military intrigues.²³ A poll conducted in August 1985 indicated substantial changes in public opinion regarding the military. Whereas in previous eras, the military had been held in relatively high esteem by a strong majority of Argentines, it now ranked last in prestige on a list of 12 major groups. Unprecedented was the strong disapproval of the armed forces registered by members of Argentina's upper class. One of the directors of the survey observed, 'People in the highest classes sense that the military no longer defend their interests and sociologically speaking, constitute a risk'.²⁴ Furthermore, parties of the right, which traditionally represented the highest classes, called for subordination of the military to

²⁰ World Bank, *Economic Memorandum on Argentina*, Report No. 4979–AR (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 398 and appendix, pp. 33, 286.

²¹ The destruction of the industrial sector is detailed in Victor Tokman, 'Global Monetarism and Destruction of Industry', *CEPAL Review*, vol. 33 (Aug. 1984), pp. 107–21.

²² *Latin America Weekly Report*, 28 June 1985, p. 10.

²³ This contrasts sharply with the Illia years, when from 1964 onwards, coup plotting against that Radical Party government had become a publicly discussed issue with virtually every political group from left to right participating.

²⁴ *Latin America Weekly Report*, 16 Aug. 1985, p. 10.

civilians, democratic socialisation of military officials, and reduced conscription.²⁵ The transformation of political agents from inconstant to loyal opponents lifted from the shoulders of Alfonsín a tremendous burden suffered by nearly all of his democratic predecessors. Taken together, the collapse of the PRN government, the decline of social resistance and the democratic practices of the political opposition strengthened Alfonsín's hand immeasurably in dealing with the armed forces.

Alfonsín's military policy

The success democratic regimes have in subordinating the armed forces after a military collapse depends largely on how their strengthened hand is played. Alfonsín used his new-found resources to weaken the armed forces politically, punish them for past offences and subordinate them to the democratic and economic order. These general strategies exemplified the Radical Party's liberal philosophy regarding the military: officers were individual citizens first, state functionaries second, but never members of a privileged corporation. As Alfonsín said: 'In a modern and democratic society, the military is merely citizens taking up arms in defence of the nation's values and its legal and political organisation in the face of external threats'.²⁶ Though soldiers may have perceived themselves to enjoy special status, under Radical Party rule they would no longer be exempt from the obligations they had as citizens to conform to the realities of the new political order *and* to share the burdens of austerity imposed by the new economic order. Therefore, the President added: 'We really want to provide the nation with the Armed Forces that each situation requires; forces whose size and preparation will be in accordance with our own possibilities'.²⁷

Towards the goal of creating an 'appropriate' defence for the nation, the government supported a series of budgetary, organisational, judicial and legislative measures aimed at paring down the institution's size, power and privileges. On the initial menu of decisions available to it, the Alfonsín Government tended to serve up policies that could be executed quickly and easily.²⁸ The President expelled some 50 generals who had

²⁵ Walter Little, 'Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary Argentina', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 19 (Spring 1984), pp 207–24.

²⁶ Dr Raúl R. Alfonsín, 'Discurso Del Señor Presidente de la Nación Argentina en la Cena de Camaradería de las Fuerzas Armadas', *República Argentina*, 5 July 1985, p. 17. Translation from the original Spanish is mine. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁸ The following are important and recent Argentine contributions to the ongoing debate over military reform: E. López et al. (eds.), *La Reforma Militar* (Buenos Aires, 1985); R. O. Orieta, *Reforma Militar para la Defensa Nacional* (Buenos Aires, 1985); Tcnl. (R) N. Cruces, *Hacia Otro Ejército Posible: Invitación al Debate Sobre Aspectos Intimos de la Profesión Militar* (Buenos Aires, 1988).

been too closely associated with the *Proceso* and promoted others who were either relatively untainted by the previous dictatorship or loyal to the government. Though described by the Defence Ministry as a process of institutional restructuring, these personnel changes had a more modest impact on the armed forces, since they left most middle and junior level positions unaffected. Alfonsín also created a civilian-dominated Ministry of Defence, while downgrading the heads of each service from commanders to chiefs of staff. The military command was reorganised by placing these officers under the political authority of the Defence Ministry, while making each of the three branches (army, air force and navy) functionally accountable to the Estado Mayor Conjunto (the Argentine Joint Chiefs of Staff) when undertaking joint operations. These organisational reforms at least formally curtailed the decision-making autonomy enjoyed by each branch, while erecting a hierarchical structure running from the President through his defence minister to his military subordinates. These steps were important insofar as they set the institutional foundations for civilian control.

Military budgets, reform and mission

The most serious and far-reaching reforms made were of a budgetary nature, since these could be enacted with a stroke of the pen. Alfonsín's goal was to reduce the size of the armed forces to a level commensurate with an underdeveloped, democratic nation at peace. Cuts were made in general allotments, salaries and materials, while investment funding was restricted only to those military projects with export components. Defence expenditures plummeted by 40% between 1983 and 1986, representing the world's largest reduction in military spending for any country whose total defence budget exceeded \$100 million. Although the deepest cuts were made in operations (42%) and equipment (50%), army salaries fell 25% between December 1983 and October 1984 alone.²⁹ As dramatic as these changes were, defence allotments as a percentage of GDP were still higher than they were in the early 1970s. However, the massive increases in military budgets during the *Proceso* years set an expectation that the budget curve would continue to move in an upwards direction or, at the very worst, gradually taper off.

Many Argentine officers were also perturbed by comparative trends in military expenditures (see Table 1). Although in absolute terms Argentina

²⁹ On general defence expenditures, see Gerardo R. Gargiulo, 'Gasto Militar y Política de Defensa', *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 28 (April–June 1988), p. 96; *Clarín*, 4 November 1984, pp. 6–7. Of the three forces, the army suffered the most drastic reductions. This gives weight to the idea that the Alfonsín administration had followed a deliberate strategy of weakening the army vis-à-vis the navy and air force.

Table 1. *Comparative military expenditures (M.E.) in Argentina, Brazil and Chile*

Country	M.E. (\$'000 1989 prices)	M.E. (\$ per head 1989 prices)	M.E. as % of GNP	M.E. as % of CGE*
Argentina				
1975	1,581	61	2.1	10.0
1980	2,891	102	3.6	16.9
1982	4,467	153	6.5	25.9
1983	3,257	110	4.6	14.9
1984	2,676	89	3.7	17.2
1985	2,295	76	3.3	12.9
Brazil				
1975	1,662	15	1.1	5.6
1980	1,387	11	0.7	2.8
1982	1,846	14	0.9	3.2
1983	1,661	12	0.9	2.8
1984	1,655	12	0.8	2.8
1985	2,236	16	1.0	3.6
Chile				
1975	640	63	4.8	13.1
1980	692	62	3.6	12.1
1982	703	61	4.2	12.5
1983	697	60	4.2	12.7
1984	726	61	4.2	11.9
1985	736	61	4.1	11.4

* CGE represents Central Government expenditures.

Source: *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, edited by James W. Wilkie (Los Angeles, 1989), p. 262.

still spent more on defence than its closest rival Brazil, by 1985 the gap had narrowed considerably. Argentine defence spending, as a proportion of GNP, declined steadily from 1983 to 1985, while Brazil's and Chile's military budgets remained more or less constant. Argentina's defence share of the government budget also declined as did Chile's, while the Brazilian share increased. Finally, military spending per head rose in Brazil and remained constant in Chile, while dropping sharply in Argentina. Despite these trends, the threat of external attack had receded through peaceful diplomatic initiatives between Argentina and its neighbouring states. Since defensive needs are assessed in proportion to risk, then some spending reductions were warranted. The question was how much.

Military chiefs of staff were generally respectful of civilian authority and therefore unwilling to challenge the president publicly on his budget proposals. Brigadier General Ernesto Crespo, the Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed the sentiments of the other chiefs of staff when he said that his force would manage with budgetary restrictions that were 'in accord with

the country's situation'.³⁰ Yet the commanders approved of Alfonsín's budget with some trepidation, fearing that without a thorough restructuring severe budget cuts could harm military alertness.

Defence Minister Raúl Borrás anticipated these concerns as early as February 1984. Citing the disastrous performance of the military in the Malvinas War, where each branch operated as if the others did not exist, the defence minister said that the tripartite military would have to learn to behave as one. The unification and coordination of military operations was an essential precondition for the modernisation of Argentina's fighting forces. Conceivably, modernisation could be facilitated by purchasing technologically advanced weaponry, but only after reorganisation, since these sophisticated systems depended upon force integration. That is why in October 1985, Chief of Staff of the Army, Ríos Ereñú, urged that separate branch schools be dissolved and that cavalry and infantry artillery divisions be eliminated and replaced with inter-service units that would correspond more closely to advanced technologies. Shortly thereafter, the newly appointed Minister of Defence, Roque Carranza, echoed these themes, advocating the rapid integration of the services' separate research and decision-making units as well.³¹

Of course, the success of this strategy depended to a large extent on timing and calibration. Reorganisation would have to occur in time to avert the debilitating affect of rapidly declining military budgets. If reorganisation lagged too far behind, then budget cuts would simply impair defensive operations. And if structural changes were slow in coming, then logically budgetary targets would have to be readjusted. In April, 1985, a Defence Ministry report acknowledged that the 'current budget only allows for a minimal operation for a short time' and moreover that 'if the same amount of funds is allocated without changing the structure, the decline is bound to continue inflicting growing damage on defence capabilities'.³²

Notwithstanding Defence Ministry warnings, timing and calibration were not given serious consideration by the Alfonsín government. Outside of the ministry, most government officials seemed generally unruffled by these complexities. On the contrary, they were relatively optimistic that economic constraints would themselves compel the necessary reforms. They reasoned that, as the availability of financial resources dwindled, the interest in cost-cutting endeavours would increase naturally, making transparent the need for reorganisation and restructuring. In other words, when faced with scarcity, the armed forces would

³⁰ *Foreign Broadcast Information Service – Latin America (FBIS-LAT)*, 16 April 1985, p. B2.

³¹ *FBIS-LAT*, 2 Oct. 1985, pp. B2-B3; *Latin America Weekly Report*, 25 Oct. 1985, p. 1.

³² *FBIS-LAT*, 16 April 1985, p. B3.

react rationally by realising that the shared use of resources and inter-service cooperation were necessary to their own survival.

The expectation that harsh economic realities would automatically invite inventive solutions was unrealistic. To restructure was to call upon the armed forces to abandon ingrained patterns of behaviour which for decades had served its members well on an individual level regardless of how irrational they may have been on an institutional level. Personal, unit (cavalry *v.* infantry) and service (army *v.* navy) rivalries over scarce resources complicated the quest for unification and rationalisation of military functions. Weapons systems, intelligence agencies, and research centres were assets to be jealously guarded and preserved in their historic forms, not to be handed over to the defence ministry to be abolished, transformed, merged or reassigned for the good of the whole.³³ The willingness of the three forces to adopt new patterns of interaction lagged far behind the budget cuts, something that the Alfonsín government had not fully anticipated. With the prospects of a speedy, military reorganisation appearing dimmer by the moment, the government should have readjusted its budgetary targets in order to avert operational decay. But rather than recalibrate, Alfonsín continued to cut expenditure on defence. By the end of 1986, military spending had plummeted to 2.3 % of GNP, its lowest level in years.³⁴

The government had also not given careful enough consideration to policy sequence. In advocating reorganisation, many officers argued, prior to the development of a military mission and doctrine, the civilians had placed the cart before the horse. The military would not and could not commit itself to any such changes until it understood what longer term purposes these were designed to fulfil. First and foremost, the military needed to be reassigned a strategic mission, or a general purpose and direction for the deployment of its forces. Counter-insurgency missions, long espoused by the Argentine armed forces, were no longer acceptable to the civilians. Secondly, it required a doctrine and strategic plan to guide the operation of the forces. Only then could organisational variables be manipulated to achieve the assigned objectives. To commence with the third step was senseless without agreement on the first two. Hence, as an article in *Aerospacio*, the Air Force's official journal put it: 'The doctrine must be assigned special importance and if not previously accepted and

³³ For example, left untouched was the army's intelligence battalion 601, an agency with over 2,000 employees (including many who were implicated in human rights abuses), and one that was answerable neither to the government nor to the rest of the military. See *The New York Times*, 3 Nov. 1985, p. 3. The difficulties in adjusting officers to new and cooperative interservice patterns of behaviour were revealed to me by Julio De'orve, Director of Logistical Affairs in the Alfonsín Defence Ministry. Interview with author, Buenos Aires, July, 1986. ³⁴ Gargiulo, 'Gasto Militar', p. 90.

sincerely respected, the careful manner in which the two following steps may be carried out will not have much sense... A doctrine which does not have the approval of its executioners is valueless'.³⁵ The article continued: 'In brief, the reorganisation of the armed forces must initially take place in a mainly intellectual area rather than in the classical structural one as it is in that field where the most sensitive variations – which will subsequently give rise to internal reordering – must be made'.³⁶

Because the government had not broken ground on the development of a new mission, it made little headway in its plans for institutional reform. Equally serious was the fact that Alfonsín had not acknowledged one of the minimal principles of defence preparedness. This became apparent in late 1984, when the government ceded responsibility to devise a new strategic plan to the Policy and Strategy Department within the Estado Mayor Conjunto. The director of that Department, General Heriberto Auel, drew up such a plan only to have it summarily rejected by Alfonsín. In turning it down, the President argued that there were no 'hypotheses of conflict' worth contemplating, since Argentina was at peace with her neighbours and with other countries in the region.³⁷

Normally, it is the task of the governing authorities to identify hypothetical conflicts of a political nature so that potential difficulties can be anticipated. Equipped with these forecasts, the military could then devise contingency plans should political disputes spill over into violent confrontations. By denying that the nation faced any credible threats, the government pulled the rug out from under its own reforms, because it left the military in a state of intellectual 'paralysis' – without the strategic underpinnings necessary to orient the reorganisational process.³⁸ Perhaps most importantly, the political class had abdicated its responsibility to help shape defensive strategies. In not offering up alternative scenarios to those posed by the Estado Mayor Conjunto, the government lost an opportunity to illustrate its own expertise, making it more difficult for the civilian defence 'establishment' to earn the military's respect.

Predictably, defence operations were impaired as a result of 'fiscal austerity without reform'. The navy reported that its pilots were unable to carry out their routine number of night flights and that training programmes had been emasculated. Equipment lay in a state of serious disrepair, conscription was in decline and as many as 500 officers were slated for premature retirement by the end of 1984. In fact, the exodus of enlisted men, NCOs and commissioned officers from all three services

³⁵ *Joint Publication Research Service – Latin America (JPRS–LAT)*, 2 May 1986, p. 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁷ General Heriberto Auel, interview with the author, Buenos Aires, 31 July 1989.

³⁸ Interview with General Heriberto Auel, *Cronista Comercial*, 18 June 1989, p. 4.

continued without interruption for several years.³⁹ Military salaries were insufficient to support soldiers and their families, and reports of food and housing shortages were commonplace. Economic realities forced soldiers to find secondary forms of employment, and thereby become part-time professionals, or simply abandon the service altogether – even before meeting the minimum number of years to qualify for a pension. This, coupled with 15 % reductions in the drafting of conscripts and sharp drops in applications to training schools, resulted in an overall dramatic decline in the size of the armed forces from 153,000 in 1983 to 78,000 in 1986. The army was hardest hit, losing 45 % of its manpower from 1983–7, compared to a 30.1 % fall for the navy and 11.8 % for the air force.⁴⁰

To deal with personnel shortages, the military ordered NCOs to perform guard duty normally assigned to conscripts. Resentful of their transfer to what they considered to be menial tasks, many NCOs became insubordinate. The increasingly restless and defiant junior officer corps within the army published a statement saying that budget cuts will lead to ‘a clinical death (of the military) within a relatively short period of time’, and belittled the Defence Ministry calling it a ‘Ministry for Disarmament’.⁴¹

Alfonsín’s options were limited by the advice and agenda of his Minister of Economics, Juan Sourrouille. Sourrouille was the quintessential technocrat: insular, persistent, confident in the logic of his own theoretical formulations, and eager to execute policies without the benefit of consultation, negotiation or compromise with either members of his own political party, other ministers or representatives of leading interest groups. The economics minister insisted that in keeping a tight rein on central government spending, no concessions be made to any group – the armed forces included.

The minister’s fiscal strategies were part of the larger, heterodox stabilisation programme called Plan Austral, which was launched in mid-1985 and included currency reform, increased taxation and wage and price controls aimed at both averting zero-sum conflicts between labour and capital and reversing hyperinflationary trends.⁴² For the next year and a

³⁹ *Bimestre*, 2 Aug. 1984, p. 80; *FBIS-LAT*, 4 Dec. 1984, p. B3; *La Voz*, 16 April 1985, p. 4.

⁴⁰ See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance* (1983–4), p. 104; (1987–8), p. 179.

⁴¹ *FBIS-LAT*, 16 April 1985, p. B2; *FBIS-LAT*, 31 Dec. 1984, p. B4.

⁴² A detailed explanation of Alfonsín’s economic policies and Plan Austral in particular can be found in William C. Smith, ‘Democracy, Distributional Conflicts and Macroeconomic Policymaking in Argentina (1983–1989)’, in James Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra (eds.), *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record*, vol. viii (New York, forthcoming), p. 9.

half, the government's standing was boosted by the Plan Austral. Monthly inflation, which had averaged 22.3 % in the year leading up to the plan, decreased to just 4.9 % the year thereafter. Thanks largely to increases in tax receipts, the public sector deficit was brought under greater control as well. These trends contributed to improved economic performance overall, as real GDP increased by 5.4 % in 1986. The Alfonsín government received votes of confidence in its economic strategies from the International Monetary Fund which agreed to a \$1.4 billion standby credit that cleared the way for a rescheduling of \$30.2 billion in public external debt to private foreign banks. Ironically, it was precisely this early success of the Plan that could have permitted the President to consider modest increases in selected components of the military budget (e.g. operations maintenance and acquisitions) without impairing economic objectives, were he so disposed. But Sourrouille insisted emphatically – over the objections of the defence ministry – that the President ‘stay the course’. His views prevailed.

Moreover, the government was able to trade the early success of the Plan Austral into political gain. In late 1985, the Radical Party won congressional elections handsomely, capturing 43 % of the vote to the Peronists' 34 %, and winning 20 of 24 electoral districts. The President's personal popularity had been high since his inauguration, but peaked in August 1985 with a 74 % approval rating. Reliable opinion polls continued to show strong public animosity towards the armed forces, and approval (79 %) for the trial of the former members of the military junta.⁴³ Euphoric over its electoral gains and hopeful that the stage had been set for a ‘Third Argentine Movement’ called *Alfonsinismo*, the Radical Party discounted the harmful consequences of what had become an increasingly more punitive set of measures aimed at the armed forces. The imposition of budgetary guidelines that threatened operational viability, the failure to contemplate the possibility of conflict or to establish an acceptable military mission, and (as will be explained) the prosecution of junior officers for crimes committed during the *Proceso*, together amounted to an accumulation of costly measures without any countervailing rewards.

For the government, these were apparently risks worth taking. Having made economic and political headway, with the balance of forces in its favour, and secure in its own political judgements, the government moved forward quickly and unilaterally.⁴⁴ The Radical Party sensed an urgent

⁴³ On presidential popularity, see *La Nación Semanal*, 2 Sept. 1985, p. 4. Other polls from *Latin America Weekly Report*, 16 Aug. 1985, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Gary Wynia has shown how Argentine civilian and military governments alike have enforced their own political isolation by formulating and implementing economic

need to achieve all that it could in the short term, fearing that the advantage might be lost later on. However, the side effect of overwhelming its military rivals was so to reduce the morale of the armed forces as to create a store of resentment against the government which would soon be summoned in acts of defiance.

The human rights trials

The dangers involved in the government's policies towards the military were underscored by the prolongation of public trials against officers accused of having committed human rights violations during the 'Dirty War'. In the midst of declining salaries and operational deficiencies, the military were now charged with having systematically violated the rights of political detainees during the course of their counter-insurgency struggles. The government had given the military the opportunity to 'clean its own house' by trying officers in military court. But the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, comprised of retired officers from each branch, was unwilling to prosecute the military defendants for orders it considered legitimate, thus sending the proceedings into Federal Appellate Court.⁴⁵ In December 1985, the *ex-comandantes* of the military junta were found guilty of flagrant violations of human rights and sentenced to long prison terms.

The trials of the *ex-comandantes* made political and moral sense. Though unprecedented and risky, the judicial proceedings were nonetheless beneficial to a government that had pledged to punish the perpetrators of the 'Dirty War', and beneficial to a society eager to vent its anger and repulsion over state-sanctioned violence. The trials also served as a warning to future authoritarian governments who might contemplate reprisals against their citizens. The prosecution of the junta members even met with the approval of many officers who were anxious to divorce themselves from disreputable figures of the past and earn their credentials as professionalised soldiers under democratic auspices.

policies unilaterally, without adequate consultation with the interest groups to be affected. See G. Wynia, *Argentina in the Post War Era: Politics and Economic Policy Making in a Divided Society* (Albuquerque, 1987).

⁴⁵ A modified article of the Code of Military Justice enabled the Federal Appellate Court to take over the cases from the Military Court if it could be shown that there were unjustifiable delays in the proceedings. See O. Igounet and O. Igounet, *Código de Justicia Militar* (Buenos Aires, 1985), p. 432. Still, a year had passed before the cases were transferred, costing the Alfonsín government valuable time in its efforts to reduce tensions with the armed forces. See Robert Potash, 'Alfonsín and the Argentine Military', paper presented at the XV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, December, 1989.

However, when judicial proceedings continued against unit commanders charged with inflicting abuses of their own, the government unwittingly deepened military resentments against itself. In June 1986, a Federal Court requested that the armed forces turn over some 300 additional cases (1,700 charges) of junior officers – 20% of whom were on active duty – to be tried on human rights offences.⁴⁶ This new judicial ‘offensive’ led many in the military to believe there were no limits to the number of soldiers who could be prosecuted. The government went to great lengths to calm military anxieties, arguing that a few individuals were on trial – not the institution itself.⁴⁷ It amended the Military Code of Justice to specify that only the superior who had issued an order that resulted in the commission of a crime could be held responsible, and that subordinates would be culpable only when they had exceeded the orders by committing ‘atrocities or aberrations’.⁴⁸ Others who simply followed orders would be absolved of any wrongdoing. This became known as the principle of *obediencia debida* or due obedience.

As sensible as the government’s tri-fold distinction appeared to be, it represented a serious misunderstanding of the military’s position. This misunderstanding was evidenced by the fact that not one soldier had ever availed himself of the legal defence as provided for by *obediencia debida*. On institutional, *not* moral grounds, the military’s argument was compelling: since officers who had allegedly exceeded orders by committing atrocities or ‘aberrations’ did so with the full knowledge and under the direction of superiors, then they too had acted dutifully. Ironically, military lawyers gave sustenance to the position advocated by human rights organisations that if there were excesses, then these were orders. A soldier could be prosecuted only if he had undertaken actions on his own, unbeknown to senior officers and out of step with operational guidelines.⁴⁹ Under these circumstances few if any could have committed any wrongdoings, since commanders were thought to have firm control over their subordinates, and since the system had fully authorised repressive, counter-subversive operations. Thus, those who committed atrocities were as easily pardonable as those who did not. Conversely, if one individual were

⁴⁶ *La Nación Edición Internacional*, 23 June 1986, p. 5.

⁴⁷ According to Mark Osiel, this was the cornerstone of the Alfonsín judicial strategy. See his article, ‘The Making of the Human Rights Policy in Argentina: The Impact of Ideas and Interests on a Legal Conflict’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 18 (1986), p. 149.

⁴⁸ See article 514 as amended by law 23,049, in Igounet and Igounet, *El Código de Justicia Militar*, pp. 158, 432.

⁴⁹ On excesses being regularised acts of repression conducted daily by the armed forces, see Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más* (Buenos Aires, 1986), p. 481. Also see Igounet and Igounet, *Código de Justicia Militar*, pp. 159–65.

brought to justice, he would necessarily implicate others along the chain of command, dragging down the entire institution. From this angle of vision, the trials represented attacks on the corporate integrity of the military.

The military's ideological position made acceptance of *obediencia debida* even less likely. For the armed forces, the 'Dirty War' was a just war. As viewed through the lens of the National Security Doctrine (NSD), the war was the fulfilment of their highest obligations to the state: the elimination of 'subversive terrorism' and the restoration of political 'order'. Because the 'Dirty War' had become an object of pride for Argentina's soldiers, they could not accept the principle of due obedience since to do so would have been to implicitly endorse the concept of improper obedience.⁵⁰ Having fought the just war and having won, the military deserved recognition rather than blame, so they claimed.

The miscalculations on the part of the government were twofold. The first was to underestimate the collective and ideological solidarity of the armed forces. Criminal offences which the government treated as a series of individual and unrelated events were perceived by the armed forces to be inoffensive and inseparable from one another. The second was to allow the trials to drag on indefinitely.⁵¹ Damage would have been mitigated if the proceedings had been brought to a swift conclusion after the December 1985 prosecution of the ex-junta members. The government would have been able to claim that the political leaders of the *Proceso* had been punished while the military as an institution had been spared. Indeed many officers felt disgraced by their association with the *cúpula militar* of the *Proceso* which had shamed the profession with flagrant corruption and brazen displays of arrogance. These officers declared as early as February 1984 that 'some [meaning the junta] have to be punished so that all don't look guilty'.⁵²

The prolonged proceedings had a corrosive effect on the military. Forced to absorb the unrelenting costs of prosecution and public humiliation at the hands of the media, some members of the armed forces became more adversarial in their dealings with the government.⁵³

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Ernesto López for his insights on this point. For further explanation of this and other components of the government's legal strategy, see his book *El Último Levantamiento*, pp. 49–54.

⁵¹ Juan Gauna, the Secretary of Defence under Alfonsín, admitted that it was a tactical error on his government's part not to have pressed for the termination of the trials shortly after the sentencing of the ex-comandantes, in December 1985. Interview with author, Buenos Aires, 15 August 1989.

⁵² *The New York Times*, 18 Feb. 1984, p. 3.

⁵³ It is well known that the Argentine armed forces are divided institutions. But in recent years, important horizontal cleavages of an ideological and professional character, cutting across hierarchical lines of authority, have emerged to supplant vertical

However, it was not the trials alone that turned these officers into adversaries, but rather the combined impact of economic austerity, organisational decay, and prolonged, judicial (and public) humiliation. Officers became alarmed over changes that in their minds were linked, cumulative and mutually reinforcing. For them, these changes seemed to be converging on one point: the 'de-professionalisation' of the armed forces. Budgets which made career advancement impossible to achieve, and judicial proceedings whose allegations of immoral conduct within the ranks were humiliating and degrading, conspired to produce a profound crisis of professional identity within the services. It was from the depths of this crisis that officers rose up to challenge the military hierarchy and the policies of state.

True, Alfonsín continued to enjoy support from the top commanders of the three forces as well as from a core of career-minded officials. But the judicial delays coupled with the other reforms tended to strengthen the hand of extremists willing to challenge military policy while crowding out the voices of moderation and restraint. In authoring a bill almost two years later which placed the first legislative restrictions on the judicial process, the President found himself reacting to a steady drum beat of discontent within the armed forces. The measure helped temporarily to cut his losses, but did little to rebuild military confidence in his policies.

Unexpectedly, the passage of the *Punto Final* legislation in December 1986 – legislation that placed a 60-day time limit on the indictments of military officers for human rights offences – did not put an end to the trials. Human rights groups and lawyers worked feverishly under deadline during the summer vacation to press charges against as many officers as they could. By the middle of January 1987, 487 cases had been presented to courts against some 130 soldiers, one-fifth of whom were on active duty. The knowledge that additional convictions would follow led to an organised rebellion of junior officers against their senior commanders during Holy Week in April of that year. Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico and his co-conspirators barricaded themselves inside the Campo de Mayo Regiment, facing no resistance from other soldiers who sympathised with their demand for the resignation of General Ríos Ereñú, Alfonsín's trusted chief of staff.

The crisis was resolved when the President intervened personally by flying to Campo de Mayo to seek an end to the hostilities. Alfonsín received immediate praise for his courage in personally confronting the

cleavages between officers of similar rank. Opposition to Alfonsín's policies has come mainly from a group of junior officers in the army. On recent cleavage patterns within the military, see Ernesto López, *El Último Levantamiento*.

rebellious officers. But it was soon revealed that the President had been more conciliatory than demanding in his meeting with the rebels. Confident that Alfonsín could not (as commander-in-chief) remove him by force, and not content with the resignation of Ereñú, Rico pressed for an end to the human rights trials as a *quid pro quo* for terminating the insurrection. Less than a week after the rebellion was ended, the President submitted a bill to Congress (subsequently approved) that exonerated all officers at the rank of lieutenant colonel or lower charged with human rights offences. The bill was precisely what the military was hoping for, indicating that – after having first confronted the rebels – Alfonsín had then acquiesced in the face of the military's counter threat.⁵⁴ By contesting the military and then not standing his ground, Alfonsín lost a great deal of political credibility.

Despite his contention that such legislation had been planned well in advance of the rebellion, Alfonsín could not escape from the public perception that he had conceded under the duress of military recalcitrance. By having failed to offer the military sufficient rewards during the first part of his term with the balance of power clearly in his favour, he could not now demonstrate policy consistency nor convince the public that his concessions were chosen rather than the result of pressure. In withholding any rewards and then frantically complying with the military's wishes after threats had been issued, Alfonsín fostered a perception of weakness. That perception in turn invited junior officers to become even more adventurous and insubordinate later on.

The President faced constraints which fenced him in from opposite directions. The first was from the military itself. Not satisfied with almost complete judicial exoneration, the armed forces next wanted public affirmation for its countersubversive 'heroics'. Consequently, the near termination of the trials did not win for Alfonsín the military's unconditional acceptance of civilian control as he had desired. The second constraint was judicial. Alfonsín had pledged his government's respect for the autonomy of the courts. Hence, the legal process was difficult (though not impossible) to curb once set in motion. The government could have interceded, but without legislative consent could not have done so legally. Unfortunately, the third constraint was the Congress itself. The

⁵⁴ *Clarín Weekly*, 25 May 1987, p. 1. Accounts of the military uprisings can be found in various issues of *La Nación* and *Clarín* between 17 and 20 April 1987. The speed with which Alfonsín made his concessions coupled with the fact that the new law went beyond earlier versions of *obediencia debida* by extending an amnesty for all junior officers – whether or not they had committed excesses (torture, executions, etc.) and to more senior officers who were not key decision-makers in the 'Dirty War' – reinforced the view that the government had emerged in a weaker position.

prolongation of these human rights trials met with the support of over 30 deputies from his own party, as well as the entire *Renovador* wing of the Peronist Party. Winning congressional approval for a complete amnesty for the accused would have been improbable. The passage of the *Punto Final* legislation seemed to be the best Alfonsín could hope for, though such an initiative should have been taken earlier. Even then, it was only through the President's last-minute personal appeals to Radical Party deputies, his rallying of Orthodox Peronist and provincial party votes and his pledge to absorb all the political costs for the decision that he was able to garner the necessary votes for the *Punto Final*.⁵⁵

The Radical Party defence law and ideological intransigence

The Radical Party government first submitted new defence legislation in 1984. After some debate, the bill was passed by both houses in December 1987 and became law in April 1988. Though amended, the final product was much in keeping with the letter and spirit of the original Radical Party proposal. An essential objective of this legislation was to annul the previous defence law crafted by the military regime of General Juan C. Onganía in 1966. For many Argentines, the Onganía law (16,970) embodied the institutionalisation of the National Security Doctrine (NSD). National security became the legal umbrella under which all governmental functions – including defence – were subsumed. The statute vested the military government with the powers not only to define national interests, but also to subject all policies of state to a formal national security clearance in order to insure that those interests were protected.⁵⁶ As the self-anointed guardians of the state, the armed forces were thus able to extend their powers beyond defence to the political sphere as well. The law also became the rationale for a permanent war without borders against an ideological enemy that would require the armed forces to react to internal as well as external threats.

The Radical Party was hoping that the new defence law would represent the NSD's formal demise. The most critical passage was Article Two which defined the role of the armed forces as follows:

National defence is the integration and coordinated action of all the nation's forces for the solution of those conflicts that require the deployment of the armed forces, in a dissuasive or effective form, to confront aggressions of *external origin* [emphasis mine]. It has as its objective the permanent guarantee of the sovereignty and independence of the Argentine Nation, its territorial integrity

⁵⁵ See Andrés Fontana, 'La Política Militar', p. 26–7.

⁵⁶ See Congreso de la Nación, Dirección de Información Parlamentaria, 'Ley de Defensa Nacional No. 16,970', 1970, pp. 1–6.

and its right of self-determination, [and] to protect the life and liberty of its inhabitants.⁵⁷

There are several notable features of this legislation. First, the unqualified prohibition on any form of military involvement in internal security affairs separates this law from the Spanish and Venezuelan Organic laws of defence – both of which permit the deployment of defensive forces against armed threats wherever they occur.⁵⁸ The Argentine armed forces considered the division between external and internal defence to be an artificial and self-defeating one. Nonetheless, the Radical Party feared that without such an explicit demarcation and restraint, officers would be tempted once again to overstep their bounds. Internal security, the law declared, was neither a defence matter nor within the military's purview. Though acknowledging that internal disturbances could occur, these situations – regardless of their magnitude and severity – could be handled by the nation's security forces, the *Gendarmería* and *Prefectura Naval*.

Second, the legislation was unusual in its removal of any mention of national security whatsoever.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that defence and security functions are integrally related, the Radical Party reasoned that the mere use of the concept would somehow permit the armed forces to engage in a broad range of non-military functions as it had in the past. But as Fitch argues, 'The concept of national security is not in itself inconsistent with democratic control of the armed forces' so long as the political authorities and not the armed forces decide how best to marshal national resources to protect the country's vital interests.⁶⁰ The Argentine defence law certainly did place decision-making powers squarely in civilian hands, reserving for the armed forces only limited and informal advisory capabilities. Apparently, however, the government and its congressional supporters believed that irrespective of how clearly lines of authority were drawn, they would never cure the problems historically associated with national security unless the term was banished from the lexicon of defence.

And third, the law refused the military a seat on the *Consejo de Defensa*

⁵⁷ República Argentina, *Boletín Oficial*, 1st section, 5 May 1988, p. 4. My translation.

⁵⁸ Comparisons with Spain and Venezuela are quite appropriate. Defence ministry officials from Argentina conferred with their Spanish counterparts in 1984 on the development of their own laws. And Venezuela is often noted as a model of civilian control for Latin America. See 'Ley Orgánica de España 6/1980', *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, no. 165, 10 July 1980, p. 33; 'Ley Orgánica de Seguridad y Defensa de Venezuela', *Gaceta Oficial*, no. 1,899, 26 Aug. 1976, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Both the Spanish and Venezuelan Defence laws joined defence and security concerns.

⁶⁰ See J. Fitch, 'Military Professionalism', p. 140.

Nacional (National Defence Council), comprised of the vice-president, cabinet ministers and the head of intelligence. Except by special invitation of the defence minister, the armed forces could not regularly participate in advising and assisting the president on matters pertaining to defence. This contrasts with the Venezuelan Defence Law that assigns a permanent seat on the National Security and Defence Council to the military head of the joint chiefs of staff.⁶¹

The new defence law was, to a great extent, driven by an ideological agenda calculated once and for all to put to rest the dreaded NSD. For the most part, the legal repudiation of the NSD was completely unobjectionable. Nonetheless, the bill's sponsors dismissed compromise positions that would have allowed for occasional use of the armed forces against uncontrollable domestic violence. Rejected was a proposal that the state retaliate in proportion to the scale of force used by the aggressor, thus permitting military engagement only where the firepower of the opposition exceeded that of the internal security forces. Also rejected were similar amendments that recognised that internal conflicts varied tremendously in scope and intensity, making military involvement justifiable in some instances and not others.⁶² Not contemplated by the new defence law was what to do in the event that guerrilla insurgents were to overpower the internal security forces of the *Gendarmería* and *Prefectura Naval*, neither force having been properly trained or equipped to deal with threats of this nature.

Understandably, refusal to include the military in the National Defence Council was intended to enable civilians to set defence priorities. But in failing to include representatives of the armed forces, the government could not regulate civil–military interaction on defence-related matters. This only reinforced the military's sense of isolation from issues of vital importance to it.

Military reactions to the proposed legislation were even more extreme and ideologically doctrinaire. Senior and junior officers alike believed the defence law was inspired by a 'suicidal pacifism' that left the nation completely vulnerable. They argued that the law disallowed any anticipatory offensive capabilities – 'almost always the prelude to military defeat'.⁶³ Furthermore, the military argued it had the right to confront 'any kind of aggression or circumstance that acted against the security of the nation regardless of its origins'. Aggression was defined by the military in the loosest terms to include political, economic and even

⁶¹ See 'Ley Orgánica de Seguridad y Defensa de Venezuela', ch. 2, art. 7, p. 2.

⁶² See *Clarín*, 'Interés Radical por la Ley de Defensa', 29 July 1986, p. 2.

⁶³ *Destino Histórico*, vol. 3 (Feb. 1987), p. 41.

ideological and psychological forms of hostility.⁶⁴ This lack of precision represented a dangerous reversion to the discourse of the *Proceso* when enemies of state were perceived nearly everywhere.

With such a clouded vision of the 'enemy', the military left themselves open to the charge that dissuasive and retaliatory operations would take on a politically intrusive character, silencing all forms of expression and activity deemed to be harmful to national interests. The military failed to assure the government they would not trample upon the free market place of ideas, that democratically loyal oppositions would not be victimised, and that internal measures would be taken only as a last resort. Thus, the military extremism simply reinforced the conviction of the Alfonsín government that it was right in proposing such prohibitions on intervention in the first place.

The defence law's strict prohibitions on any form of military involvement in internal security were soon put to the test. On 23 January, 1989, a radical left group calling itself the *Movimiento Todos por la Patria* (MTP) seized the Third Mechanised Infantry Regiment of La Tablada. Numbering about thirty individuals and heavily armed with rockets and grenades, the group was able to take hostages, physically destroy the installation, and hold the military and security forces at bay for 36 hours before finally succumbing. Several of the victims were identified as being members of the allegedly defunct guerrilla organisation, ERP (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*).⁶⁵ Their daring raid gave credence to the military claim that the 'enemies' of the 1970s had not only re-emerged, but were operating *within* the territorial confines of Argentina.

The attack on La Tablada shifted the centre of gravity in the debate on defence and security from whether or not the armed forces should be permitted *any* role in internal security affairs to *how much* of a role. Evidence of this shift was easily found in President Alfonsín's authorship of an internal security decree in March of that year that permitted the use of the armed forces against internal attacks that could not be repelled by the police or by security forces.⁶⁶ The decree acknowledged that 'subversive terrorist actions' that have as their objective the destruction of the constitutional order, should warrant '*defensive measures*' that will be graduated, depending upon the magnitude of the aggression'⁶⁷ [emphasis

⁶⁴ *La Nación*, 28 Aug. 1986, p. 1.; definition of aggression provided by Navy Chief of Staff Almirante Ramón Arosa, *La Razón*, 15 Aug. 1986, p. 10.

⁶⁵ *Informador Público*, 27 Jan. 1989, pp. 3, 5, and various issues of *La Nación* during the last week of January 1989.

⁶⁶ See Decree 327/89, 'Seguridad Interior', in República Argentina, *Boletín Oficial*, section 1, 16 March 1989, p. 2. In Argentina, the main security forces are the *Gendarmería Nacional*, which is a kind of national guard/border control unit, and the *Prefectura Naval*, the Naval Prefecture.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

mine]. This passage represented a setback for the Radical Party position – as inscribed within the National Defence Law (23,554) – that had restricted defence to the coordination of actions to face aggressions of external origin only.

The executive branch and its congressional allies faced only modest constraints in seeking passage of the new defence law. At the time the defence bill was first introduced, the Radical Party enjoyed an absolute majority (51 %) in the *Cámara de Diputados*, and within the *Comisión de Defensa* as well (52 %), enabling the legislation to move quickly through the lower house. In the senate, neither party enjoyed a majority, but the Peronists had the edge in seats. As a result, the original bill was amended and had to be sent back to the House for final approval. Parliamentary delays forced reconsideration of the bill in November 1987. This came after the Radical Party's defeat in congressional elections in September that reduced its plurality to 45 and 48 % in the lower house and defence commission respectively, with the Peronists preserving a larger plurality in the senate. As a result, the Radicals had now to *negotiate* a final version with their Peronist counterparts. In the end, however, and to the surprise of even some of the bill's sponsors, the final version won passage with only minor departures from the original.⁶⁸

Conclusion

As its helmsman, Raúl Alfonsín succeeded in guiding the Argentine ship of state toward the shores of peaceful, governmental succession. With the presidential sash transferred from Alfonsín to Carlos Menem in July 1989, the first phase of democratic reconstruction in Argentina had been completed. An equilibrium of sorts had been achieved. There were no coups or reported coup attempts, and levels of political violence were lower than in previous democratic periods. During the early part of the journey, the balance of forces had swung away from the military and toward the democratic leadership. To take advantage of this shift in power, the President moved quickly and decisively to impose a series of measures designed to erode military strength even further: budgets were cut, reorganisational plans were written, the military command structure was overhauled, ex-junta members were prosecuted and their associates purged from the ranks. As valuable as these exercises in 'house cleaning and rebuilding' were, they were insufficient, serving only as a preface to civilian control.

⁶⁸ José Manuel Ugarte, a legislative aide to the Comisión de Defensa in the Cámara de Diputados who drafted much of the Radical Party defence law, said he was pleasantly surprised at the outcome. Interview with author, Buenos Aires, 26 August 1989.

In navigating the political waterways, Alfonsín may not have chosen the safest passage, nor did he leave the ship of state unscathed by the journey. Rather than cultivate a new military respect for subordination to civilian control, the government often tried simply to enforce it. Enforcement was possible owing to the debilitated condition of the armed forces in the immediate aftermath of the transition. However, in doing so, Alfonsín underestimated the military's capacity to resuscitate itself. Unexpectedly, the armed forces climbed back from the depths of their professional despair to discover a new resolve. With the balance of power turning in their favour, junior officers sought retribution against the civilians for their previous excesses. A new pattern of action and interaction displayed itself as a zero-sum power struggle, with gains to one side representing onerous losses to the other. Neither side seemed willing or able to transcend the power struggle to find a relationship based on mutual restraint and cooperation. As a result, civil–military relations could not move beyond a state of unstable equilibrium and on to a more stable plane of mutual cooperation and restraint.

The Alfonsín government had exhausted its political capital hastily, fearing that if the balance of power were to turn against it later on, opportunities would be forever lost. But the unintended consequences of overutilising its resources was to overwhelm the armed forces. The budget curtailments, the prosecution of junior officers for their human rights crimes, and the government's legislative annulment of the National Security Doctrine, represented 'costs' to the armed forces. Perceived by the military to be linked, cumulative and unrelenting, these 'costs' contributed to a resentment which swept through the middle and lower ranks of an institution still trying to recover from its own self-inflicted wounds, and drove individual soldiers to greater levels of frustration, anger and ultimately insubordinate behaviour.

Though there were countervailing rewards, these were few in number and not amicably received by the armed forces. The one legal concession offered to the military (*obediencia debida*) was well intended but misguided. In failing to follow up reprisals with effective restitution during the first three years of his administration, Alfonsín heightened rather than soothed military fears about the new democratic order later on. A more careful balance between rewards and punishments might have instilled in the armed forces an underlying confidence that the new rules of behaviour would not impair their welfare. Although it was within his powers to manipulate military perceptions to allay fears of institutional decay, Alfonsín often chose not to do so, confident that the balance of forces in the post-*Proceso* era would eventually compel the military to submit to his authority. Transition through military collapse certainly did strengthen

the hand of Argentina's democratic leadership. Indeed, the weakened state of the armed forces largely accounts for Alfonsín's ability to serve out his full term of office. But, as this study has shown, it is the deftness with which governments devise and deploy military policy that ultimately facilitates or impedes the quest for civilian control.