
ing around the city all day, I would look up at the American flag and think about how lucky we were. I still have that flag.

John Frese was regional security officer in Monrovia, Liberia, from 1994 to 1996. He joined the Foreign Service in 1985 and has also served in Beirut, Lebanon; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Bamako, Mali; Kuwait, Kuwait; Lagos, Nigeria; Washington, D.C.; and Cairo, Egypt. John was awarded the Department of State's Medal of Valor for his leadership and courage during the Liberia crisis.

Fighting the 'Dirty War'

ARGENTINA, 1977

By F. A. "Tex" Harris

In October 1977, as a mid-level officer in Buenos Aires on my second overseas tour, I was asked by the embassy's political counselor to take responsibility for a new area of diplomatic activity — human rights reporting. I agreed, but had one condition: long-standing entry restrictions for uninvited visitors to the embassy had to be relaxed. I needed to be able to interview anyone who wanted to report the "disappearance" of a relative. The old embassy hands worried that this would draw a flood of relatives of victims, but I felt strongly that the job could not be done unless I could meet directly with the families of the "disappeared."

Within a few weeks, scores of people were flooding in daily to report their missing loved ones. The embassy, which had lived through months of terrorist threats and the terrible murder of a U.S. Information Service colleague at a branch post, had previously characterized the disappearances as part of a "dirty war" between left-wing terrorists and right-wing militias that continued after the Argentine military took power in a 1976 coup. My daily interviews told a different story. The hundreds of reports from family members demonstrated a massive, coherent, well-planned military effort to exterminate thousands of Argentine citizens who were targeted for their political beliefs, not their terrorist actions. I collected about two thousand personal accounts of disappearances on index cards. This was the raw data for my reporting to Washington.

At first, my cables to Washington detailing the human rights violations were applauded by the embassy staff from Ambassador Raul Castro on down. Then the consequences of the new Carter human rights policy became clear. U.S. policy towards Argentina changed. No longer were decisions being based primarily on the ambassador's recommendations, but also on the behavior of the Argentine government as documented in my human rights reporting. For the first time in American foreign policy, critical decisions were being based in substantial part on how a foreign government treated its own citizens. Argentina represented the cutting edge of a new dimension in American foreign policy — human rights.

A classic battle ensued, with the embassy front office trying to put a more favorable

“spin” on my human rights reporting. As it became more difficult to report the full details of disappearances in diplomatic cables, I used airmails, memoranda of conversations, and official-informal letters — none of which required front-office clearance — to send the facts to Washington by classified air pouch. My confrontation with senior embassy officials came to a head when one of my classified letters to Washington, which I had copied to the ambassador, was withdrawn from the diplomatic pouch. I was requested not to send it, but finally got the letter back into the pouch. The information in that letter resulted in the cancellation of a U.S. government loan guarantee worth several hundred million dollars for a major American corporation to provide turbine manufacturing technology to a front corporation owned by the Argentine Navy, which had been actively killing Argentine citizens. The embassy had not previously reported that key ownership connection to Washington.

As a young FSO, it was tough to fight with the ambassador. I stood firm on the need to get the full facts to Washington. I knew that my performance evaluation would suffer. I was almost fired for insubordination, but after an independent review, I was given only a formal warning. In 1993, with the benefit of 15 years of historical hindsight, the State Department awarded me its highest medal — the Distinguished Honor Award — for my reporting from Argentina.

Outside the embassy, things were easier for me. As an American diplomat, my information about the military junta’s “disappearance” program authenticated the multitude of personal reports that journalists from around the world received when they came to Argentina. My Texas-sized (6’7”) diplomatic presence and open support for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, other human rights groups, and hundreds of families, showed that the American government and its people abhorred what was happening in Argentina.

At that time, I was focused on collecting and reporting the facts to the U.S. government. I also had the special responsibility to demonstrate the support of my nation to thousands of Argentines threatened by an outwardly sophisticated military junta gone out of control. Looking back on those challenging times, I know that one person can make a difference.

F. A. “Tex” Harris was a political officer in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 1977 to 1979. He joined the Foreign Service in 1964, also serving in Caracas, Venezuela; Washington, D.C.; Durban, South Africa; and Melbourne, Australia. He was twice elected AFSA president, and held that office from 1993 to 1997. He retired in 1999 after 35 years of service. AFSA’s Tex Harris Award for Dissent, given annually to a Foreign Service specialist, was established in 2000 in his honor.

After the Blast

KENYA AND TANZANIA, 1998

By Francis Njogu Mburu

On the morning of August 7, 1998, a truck entered the parking lot of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. Seconds later, the driver detonated a 2,000-pound bomb, injuring more than 5,000 people and killing more than 200, including 46