Search for a Way Out

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Haig shuttles grimly, the British steam, and Argentina digs in.

The white Boeing 707 taxied to a stop at Buenos Aires' Ezeiza Airport, and Alexander Haig stepped wearily out into the glow of television lights. The Secretary of State was nearing the end of an arduous diplomatic shuttle that had taken him some 30,000 miles and was in serious danger of stalling.

As he prepared to negotiate yet again, he sounded a familiar theme: "It is clear tonight that the task will not be easy, but what is in play is so important that everyone has to apply all the strength possible to achieve a political accord."

What was in play was nothing less than the threat of war. In personally mediating the crisis over the Falkland Islands, Haig had committed the prestige of his office—and that of Ronald Reagan's presidency—to a goal of preserving peace. He had also in a highly visible way placed the U.S. in the increasingly uncomfortable and unfortunate position of seeming to be unable to choose between siding with its closest ally or with a repressive government run by a military junta. But that was the unavoidable price of such a mediation effort.
As Haig began his talks in Buenos Aires, a 45-ship British task force, led by the aircraft carrier H.M.S. Hermes, entered the South Atlantic headed for the Falklands, the remote British colony that Argentina had invaded a fortnight earlier. Steaming at an estimated 18 knots, the armada was expected to be on station by midweek. Meanwhile, the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had already stationed four submarines, three of them nuclear powered, inside a 200-mile "maritime exclusion zone" around the Falklands, and threatened to fire on any Argentine ship that challenged the blockade. Argentina must unconditionally withdraw from the Falklands, Thatcher insisted to the approval of 80% of her countrymen, or Britain would fight.

Argentina's military rulers seemed surprised at Britain's vehemence, and stunned by the nationalistic forces it had unleashed. "The English reaction is so absurd, so disproportionate," lamented Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Mendez. "This seems like a chapter in a science-fiction novel." The junta had miscalculated international opposition to its invasion and grossly underestimated the risk of war. Its seizure of the Falkland Islands nonetheless remained popular at home. Activist Perez Esquivel, who won the Nobel Prize for his human rights crusade against the government, offered his support to the junta last week, as did an organized group of mothers of Argentines kid naped in a wave of police repression.

As the cold southern autumn settled in, the government ordered its 9,000 troops on the islands to dig in for a long siege. According to one senior officer, the Malvinas, as the islands are called in Spanish, were so heavily fortified that the British could never retake them. "If they intend to," he said, "it will be a butchery." In the island capital of Port Stanley, General Mario Benjamin Menendez, the newly appointed Argentine governor, was ensconced in the office vacated by Britain's Rex Hunt.

Haig crisscrossed the Atlantic in an exhausting attempt to arrange a military pullback. As a possible compromise, he suggested a temporary British-Argentine-U.S.

administration of the Falklands, pending a final settlement to be negotiated. Britain said it could accept such a tripartite government, but only if Argentina first surrendered sovereignty. Argentina refused, and even insisted upon leaving behind an Argentine police force once its troops were withdrawn. That in turn was unacceptable to the British. As the negotiations wore on, Haig tried several variations of the joint-administration scheme, but each foundered on the sovereignty issue.

The marathon shuttle began the week amid hopes of a breakthrough. Argentina had removed its fleet from the blockade zone, and long sessions with Argentine President Leopoldo Fortunate Galtieri and Foreign Minister Costa Mendez had convinced the Secretary of State that the Argentine government was ready to show some flexibility. Haig departed Buenos Aires on Easter Sunday with what he called "some specific fresh ideas." The next day, after an 18-hour flight, he landed in London, where he met with Thatcher, Foreign Secretary Francis Pym and Defense Secretary John Nott. Optimism over the "fresh ideas" quickly vanished, however, and the two sides spent most of the grueling eleven-hour talks doggedly searching for common negotiating ground. "We made some progress," said a visibly fatigued Haig when he emerged from No. 10 Downing Street, "but time is slipping away from us."

At that point, around midnight London time, Haig and Costa Mendez spoke by telephone, and the situation worsened. Argentina, Costa Mendez insisted, would withdraw its troops only if Britain agreed to 1) recall the task force; 2) end the blockade; 3) restore normal economic relations; and 4) leave the Argentine flag flying in the Falklands as a sign of Argentine sovereignty. The new conditions represented a major departure from the terms Haig had brought to London. When he reported them to Thatcher, the tired Prime Minister was furious.

Then, as tempers apparently cooled in Buenos Aires, Haig and Costa Mendez spoke again. Costa Mendez's new proposals remained secret, but, as one British spokesman put it, "they [the Argentines] rowed back a bit. The message Secretary Haig received wasn't as awful as the midnight proposals." The new proposals were sufficiently less awful for Pym to visit Haig at his suite in London's Churchill Hotel for a 90-minute chat. As he left the hotel, Pym told reporters that the "new ideas" advanced by Costa Mendez "may provide a way forward." Though he warned that "easy optimism would be out of place," his reaction breathed new life into Haig's diplomatic steeplechase.

Maig did not return directly to Argentina. Instead, he flew to Washington and, despite his weariness, was at his desk at 8:15 on Wednesday morning. Shortly before 10, he went to the White House and for 50 minutes briefed Reagan on the state of the negotiations. After more telephone calls with Costa Mendez and Thatcher, Haig gamely announced that he would try again. From the tone of his statements, however, it was clear that he was as impatient with Britain's intransigence as he was with Argentina's. "The leaders of both countries have assured me... that they are prepared to go on working with us," he said on the eve of his departure for Buenos Aires. "That will require flexibility on both sides—not abandonment of principle, but responsible and defensible adjustments."

As the talks resumed in Argentina on Friday, Costa Mendez expected Haig to "bend his arm—or maybe break it," according to one senior Argentine diplomat. Haig never lost his temper, but the five hours with Costa Mendez were the toughest of the entire shuttle. "I want to know the limit, limit, limit of the Argentine position," Haig insisted. Costa Mendez did not budge. Though he offered the British sovereignty over South

Georgia, he stressed that "we can never go back to April 1 [the day before the invasion]." On Saturday Haig postponed his departure in order to meet again with the Argentines.

Thatcher reiterated her firm position at an emergency session of Parliament. As it turned out, there was little debate—and virtually unanimous support for the government's policy. The negotiations, she told a cheering House of Commons, are "complex, changing and difficult, the more so because they are taking place between a military junta and a democratic government of a free people—one which is not prepared to compromise that democracy and that liberty which the British Falkland Islanders regard as their birthright." The British government would continue to listen to plans that might break the deadlock, but it would enforce its blockade of the disputed archipelago. "If the [war] zone is challenged," she declared, "we shall take that as the clearest evidence that the search for a peaceful solution has been abandoned. We shall then take the necessary action. Let no one doubt that."

The statement was a thinly disguised promise to fire on any Argentine ships inside the 200-mile limit. Later, Thatcher increased the pressure by ordering a second, smaller flotilla to leave for the Falklands. Along with support vessels, the new force included the Atlantic Conveyor, an 18,000-ton container ship modified to carry 18 Harrier jump jets, and the newly recommissioned H.M.S. Intrepid, an amphibious assault vessel capable of carrying as many as 700 troops, eight landing craft and five helicopters. In addition, the government requisitioned the cruise liner Uganda, which last week disembarked 1,295 vacationing passengers in Naples before steaming to Gibraltar, where it will be converted into a 1,000-bed hospital ship. Meanwhile, the Royal Air Force was ferrying troops to Ascension Island, a British possession in the South Atlantic, to await the new task force. "The place is chockablock with soldiers, airmen and sailors," reported an eyewitness.

British strategists have ruled out an amphibious invasion of the Falklands. Direct assault, they believe, would cost too many lives and could be used only as a last resort. "If a lot of people get killed, the government would lose support at home, in Europe and in the U.S.," explained a Cabinet minister. "If we lost the backing of any of these three elements, we would be in trouble. If we lost the support of all three, we would be faced with disaster."

Accordingly, London's plans called for a naval blockade of the islands—and perhaps of the main Argentine naval base at Puerto Belgrano, 800 miles to the northwest. "The objective," said one Cabinet member, "will be to starve the Argentine garrison on the Falklands into submission. Starve them of supplies, food and the will to resist." To do that, the British would also have to cut off air supplies to the islands, which they frankly admit they would be unlikely to do until an additional force of Harrier jet fighters is ferried to the scene and can be transferred to the two carriers, the Hermes and the Invincible. In all, the British would be able to send 38 Harriers into combat to oppose the sizable Argentine air force (see box). Said another Cabinet minister: "We could be in for a very long haul over a period of months rather than weeks. We are preparing for a long, harsh South Atlantic winter."

Argentina's military rulers showed no sign of backing away from the advancing British armada. They ordered their only aircraft carrier, the Veinticinco de Mayo, and most of the rest of the fleet out of Puerto Belgrano, apparently in anticipation of a blockade. Despite the government's claim that two small coast guard patrol boats had run the

British submarine gauntlet—a report unsubstantiated by London—there were no signs that Buenos Aires was prepared to test the blockade in any significant way. Argentina's main concern seemed to be keeping up morale in the ranks. In an Easter message to the armed forces, the junta sounded as though the shooting had already begun. Argentina's troops, the message said, were "protagonists in historic and spiritual circumstances of unusual transcendence."

At the army's main staging center in the port of Comodoro Rivada-via, 600 miles west of the Falklands, the soldiers continued to arrive, one company after another, bundled up in their padded, dark olive winter uniforms. The young pilots, the idols of the Argentines, filled the port's two small hotels. But the atmosphere was subdued, as if the new arrivals were participating in an event that still seemed so unreal as to be an impossibility: the prospect of going to war against Britain. A second lieutenant, whose parents now live in England, seemed bewildered by the preparations. Said he: "We like the British. We play their sports, and they have done very well here. The English took the islands by force and held them by force. What did we do that was any different?"

Though they officially denied it, Argentina's generals apparently got some help from an influential friend last week. As the British fleet steamed toward the Falklands, its movements were reportedly shadowed by Soviet trawlers and reconnaissance planes, which were flying out of bases in Angola. Soviet spy satellites in polar orbit kept a watchful eye on the disputed archipelago. Overlooking the problems of ideology, the Communist superpower was said to be passing on the resulting intelligence to the right-wing military dictatorship in Buenos Aires, apparently hoping to cause Britain and the U.S. as much trouble as possible.

Although Reagan called on the Soviets to "butt out," Western analysts saw little danger of the Falklands dispute ballooning into a confrontation between Washington and Moscow. The Soviets had not vetoed the U.N. Security Council's resolution condemning the Argentine invasion and, as one U.S. intelligence officer put it, "What are they going to tell the Argentines anyway?" Britain has purposely made no secret of the size and makeup of its Falklands task force, and Soviet satellites cannot locate the British submarines. Said the U.S. analyst: "We don't even know where they are."

In supporting Argentina, the Soviets seem simply to be advancing their interests. The crisis offers an opportunity to drive a wedge between Argentina and the U.S., and that in turn could affect the course of events in Central America. Moreover, supporting Argentina may help Moscow mend fences with nations in the Third World, many of whom resented the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Most important of all, the Soviet Union needs Argentina's meat and grain exports to make up for a serious food shortage.

The U.S., meanwhile, was quietly doing what it could to help the British. U.S. satellites were being used by the British to communicate with the task force in the South Atlantic. British ships and planes would be serviced at the American base on Ascension Island. Washington was passing on military intelligence to London, but not to Buenos Aires.

Fearful that Haig's mission might be compromised, U.S. officials sought to play down the significance of the pro-British tilt. As close NATO allies, one U.S. analyst pointed out, the two countries' intelligence services are "interlocking at almost every level."

Moreover, the facilities at Ascension Island are leased from Britain under terms that require the U.S. to make them available on request.

As Haig shuttled between Washington, London and Buenos Aires, he was criticized by officials at the State Department for being on the road when tensions were mounting dangerously in the Middle East and when issues ranging from Central America to arms control demanded his attention. Haig's detractors, both in and out of the Government, argued that the main job of the Secretary of State was to set broad policy, an aim the Administration has yet to fulfill. Britain and Argentina, on the other hand, welcomed Haig's personal involvement because he provided an influential—indeed the only—channel between them.

But as time went by, more and more resentment was building up in Britain against Haig's scrupulous neutrality in the negotiations. America's most faithful ally, the British reasoned, should not be equated with an unsavory military dictatorship.

Grumbled Denis Healey, the Labor Par ty's shadow Foreign Secretary: "The time has come when we must tell the U.S. that the attitude of an evenhanded broker is not quite enough." In contrast, Prime Minister Thatcher and her ministers last week accepted the fact that Haig had to take a public stance of neutrality, but the British government made it clear to the Secretary that it would expect the U.S. to change its posture if his mediating talks failed; the U.S. would be expected to join in the European trade and economic sanctions against Argentina. Warned a British Cabi net member: "If the President were to choose neutrality between a Britain countering an aggression against its territory and an Argentina which had broken the rule of law, the alliance between our two countries would suffer a blow from which it might take years to fully recover." As Foreign Secretary Pym told the House of Commons: "Freedom under the law is at stake."

Seeking to quiet those fears, the Ad ministration reportedly assured the Thatcher government that it would side with the British if all prospects of talks with the Argentines broke down. Meanwhile, Haig was not yet ready to give up his efforts to find a way out of a developing crisis between two nations both convinced they are right on a matter of honor and principle.