

# Open Letter From a Writer to the Military Junta - Rodolfo Walsh



On the one year anniversary of the military Junta of Argentina coming to power underground Journalist Rodolfo Walsh wrote an open letter denouncing the regime and listing its crimes.

*The writer and journalist Rodolfo J. Walsh sent this letter, dated March 24, 1977, by post to the editorial departments of local newspapers and to foreign press correspondents. On March 25, 1977, Walsh was kidnapped by a "Work Group" and has been missing ever since. Once the dictatorship of 1976 began, Work Groups (grupos de Larea) were formed to carry out the extermination of any individuals considered enemies of the state. These groups, composed mainly of men with experience in the military, state security, or the police department, were notorious for kidnapping victims, torturing them, killing them, and leaving no trace of their bodies.*

*The letter was not published by any local media, but it gradually came to be distributed abroad. Ever since the letter was reissued in 1984, De la Flor has included it as an Appendix in all reprints of Operation Massacre.*

1. Censorship of the press, the persecution of intellectuals, the raid on my home in Tigre, the murder of dear friends, and the loss of a daughter<sup>1</sup> who died fighting you, are some of the events that compel me to express myself in this clandestine way after having shared my opinion freely as a writer and journalist for nearly thirty years.

The first anniversary of this Military Junta has brought about a year-end review of government operations in the form of official documents and speeches: what you call good decisions are mistakes, what you acknowledge as mistakes are crimes, and what you have left out entirely are disasters.

On March 24, 1976, you overthrew a government that you yourselves were a part of, that you helped bring into disrepute as the executors of its repressive policies, and that was coming to an end, given the elections that had been set for just nine months later. From this perspective, what you destroyed was not the temporary mandate of Isabel Martinez <sup>2</sup>, but rather the possibility for a democratic process through which the people might remedy the problems that you have perpetuated and aggravated.

Illegitimate since birth, your government could have legitimized itself by reviving the political program that 80 percent of Argentines voted for in the 1973 elections, and that continues to be an objective expression of the people's will—the only thing that could possibly be denoted by the "national being"

that you invoke so often. You have gone instead in the completely opposite direction by returning to the ideas and interests of defeated minority groups, the ones who hold back workforce development, exploit the people, and divide the Nation. This kind of politics can only prevail temporarily by banning political parties, taking control of unions, silencing the press, and introducing Argentine society to the most profound terror it has ever known.

**2.** Fifteen thousand missing, ten thousand prisoners, four thousand dead, tens of thousands in exile: these are the raw numbers of this terror.

Since the ordinary jails were filled to the brim, you created virtual concentration camps in the main garrisons of the country which judges, lawyers, journalists, and international observers, are all forbidden to enter. The military secrecy of what goes on inside, which you cite as a requirement for the purposes of investigation, means that the majority of the arrests turn into kidnappings that in turn allow for torture without limits and execution without trial.<sup>3</sup>

More than seven thousand habeas corpus petitions have been denied in the past year. In thousands of other cases of missing people, the petition has not even been presented either because people know ahead of time how useless it is, or because they can't find a lawyer who will dare to present it, since the fifty or sixty who did have been kidnapped one by one.

This is how you have done away with any time limit on torture. Since the prisoner does not exist, there is no way to present him before the judge within ten days, as stipulated by the law that was respected even at the heights of repression during previous dictatorships.

The lack of any time limits has been accompanied by a lack of any limits when it comes to your methods: you have regressed to periods when victims' joints and internal organs were operated on directly, only now you use surgical and pharmacological aids that the old executioners did not have at their disposal. The rack, the drill, skinning alive, and the saw of the medieval Inquisition reappear in testimonies alongside the picana and waterboarding, the blowtorch of today.<sup>4</sup>

By succumbing repeatedly to the argument that the end of killing guerrillas justifies all your means, you have arrived at a form of absolute, metaphysical torture that is unbounded by time: the original goal of obtaining information has been lost in the disturbed minds of those inflicting the torture. Instead, they have ceded to the impulse to pommel human substance to the point of breaking it and making it lose its dignity, which the executioner has lost, and which you yourselves have lost.

**3.** The refusal of this Junta to publish the names of the prisoners is, moreover, a cover for the systematic execution of hostages in vacant lots in the early morning, all under the pretext of fabricated combat and imaginary escape attempts.

Extremists who hand out pamphlets in the countryside, graffiti the sidewalks, or pile ten at a time into vehicles that then burst into flames: these are the stereotypes of a screenplay that was written not to be believed, but to buffer against the international reaction to the current executions. Within the country, meanwhile, the screenplay only underscores how intensely the military lashes back in the same places where there has just been guerrilla activity.

Seventy people executed after the Federal Security Agency bombing, fifty-five in response to the blasting of the La Plata Police Department, thirty for the attack on the Ministry of Defense, forty in the New Year's Massacre following the death of Colonel Castellanos, and nineteen after the explosion that destroyed the Ciudadela precinct, amount to only a portion of the twelve hundred executions in three hundred alleged battles where the opposition came out with zero wounded and zero forces killed in action.

Many of the hostages are union representatives, intellectuals, relatives of guerrillas, unarmed opponents, or people who just look suspicious: they are recipients of a collective guilt that has no place in a civilized justice system and are incapable of influencing the politics that dictate the events they are being punished for. They are killed to balance the number of casualties according to the foreign "body-count" doctrine that the SS used in occupied countries and the invaders used in Vietnam.

Guerrillas who were wounded or captured in real combat are being killed just to make sure they are dead. This additional piece of evidence was taken from the military's own press releases which stated that, over the course of one year, there were six hundred guerrilla deaths and only ten or fifteen wounded—a ratio unheard of in even the bloodiest of conflicts. This suggestion is confirmed by a sampling from a secret news source which showed that, between December 18, 1976, and February 3, 1977, over the course of forty live battles, the armed forces suffered twenty-three deaths and forty wounded, and the guerrillas suffered sixty-three deaths. <sup>5</sup>

More than one hundred prisoners awaiting their sentence have also been slain in their attempts to escape. Here, too, the official story has been written not to be believable, but rather to show the guerrillas and the political parties that even those who have been acknowledged as prisoners are held on strategic reserve: the Corps Commanders use them in retaliation depending on how the battles are going, if a lesson can be learned, if the mood strikes them.

That is how General Benjamin Menendez, Commander of the Third Army Corps, earned his laurels before March 24: first with the murder of Marcos Osatinsky, who had been arrested in Cordoba, and then with the death of Hugo Vaca Narvaja and another fifty prisoners through various, merciless applications of the escape law; the official story of these deaths was told without any sense of shame.<sup>6</sup> The murder of Dardo Cabo, arrested in April 1975 and executed on January 6, 1977, with seven other prisoners under the jurisdiction of the First Army Corps led by General Suarez Mason, shows that these incidents do not constitute the indulgences of a few eccentric centurions, but rather are the very same policies that you plan among your general staff, that you discuss in your cabinet meetings, that you enforce as commanders-in-chief of the three branches of government, and that you approve as members of the Ruling Junta.

4. Between fifteen hundred and three thousand people have been massacred in secret since you banned the right to report on the discovery of bodies; in some cases, the news still managed to leak, either because it involved other countries, or because of the magnitude of your genocide, or because of the shock provoked among your own troops.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty-five mutilated bodies washed up on Uruguayan shores between March and October 1976. This was a small portion perhaps of the heaping number of those tortured to death at the Naval Mechanics Academy and dropped into the La Plata River by navy ships, among them a fifteen-year-old boy, Floreal Avellaneda, his hands and feet bound, "with bruising in the anal region and visible fractures," according to the autopsy.

In August 1976, a local man went diving in the San Roque Lake, Cordoba, and discovered a genuine swamp of a cemetery. He went to the precinct, where they would not file his report, and he wrote to the papers, where they would not publish it.<sup>8</sup>

Thirty-four bodies turned up in Buenos Aires between the third and the ninth of April 1976, eight in San Telmo on July 4, ten in the Lujan river on October 9; this, plus the massacres on August 20 that left a heap of thirty people dead fifteen kilometers from Campo de Mayo and seventeen dead in Lomas de Zamora, are all part of the same pattern.

These reports put an end to the make-believe story spun about right-wing gangs, alleged heirs to Lopez Rega's Triple A, who would be able to get past the largest garrison in the country with military trucks, carpet the La Plata River with bodies, or throw prisoners to the sea from the First Aerial Brigade<sup>9</sup> without General Videla, Admiral Massera, or Brigadier General Agosti knowing about it.<sup>10</sup>

Today, the Triple A has become the 3 Branches, and the Junta that you are running is not the balancing point between "two kinds of violence," nor is it the impartial referee between "two terrorisms"; rather, it is the very source of the terror that has lost its way and can do nothing more than babble on in its discourse of death.<sup>11</sup>

The same historical continuity ties the murder of General Carlos Prats, under the previous government, to the kidnapping and death of General Juan Jose Torres, Zelmar Michelini, Hector Gutierrez Ruiz, and dozens of political refugees whose death killed off any chances of democratic regimes in Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay.<sup>12</sup>

That the Federal Police's Department of Foreign Affairs—which is led by officials who received grant money from the CIA via USAID (like Commissioners Juan Gattei and Antonio Gettor) and are themselves under the authority of Mr. Gardener Hathaway, Station Chief of the CIA in Argentina—was undeniably involved in those crimes is the seed for future revelations like the ones that today shock the international community. The revelations will keep coming, even after a light is shined on the role that both this agency and high-ranking officers of the Army, led by General Menendez, played in the creation of the Libertadores de America Society—the same Society that replaced the Triple A until their general mission was taken on by this Junta in the name of the 3 Branches.<sup>13</sup>

This tally of destruction even includes the balancing of personal accounts—like the murder of Captain Horacio Gandara, who had been investigating the dealings of high-ranking Naval Chiefs for the past decade, or of the Prensa Libre journalist, Horacio Novillo, stabbed and burned to death after that paper reported on ties between Minister Martinez de Hoz and international monopolies.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these incidents, the definition of the war, as phrased by one of its leaders, takes on its ultimate significance: "The battle we are waging knows neither moral nor natural limits; it takes place beyond good and evil."<sup>15</sup>

**5.** These events, which have shaken the conscience of the civilized world, are nonetheless not the ones that have brought the greatest suffering upon the Argentine people, nor are they the worst human rights violations that you have committed. The political economy of the government is the place to look not only for the explanation of your crimes, but also for an even greater atrocity that is leading millions of human beings into certain misery.

Over the course of one year, you have decreased the real wages of workers by 40 percent, reduced their contribution to the national income by 30 percent, and raised the number of hours per day a worker needs to put in to cover his cost of living <sup>16</sup>from six to eighteen, thereby reviving forms of forced labor that cannot even be found in the last remnants of colonialism.

By freezing salaries with the butts of your rifles while prices rise at bayonet point, abolishing every form of collective protest, forbidding internal commissions and assemblies, extending workdays, raising unemployment to a record level of 9 percent<sup>17</sup> and being sure to increase it with three hundred thousand new layoffs, you have brought labor relations back to the beginning of the Industrial Era. And when the workers have wanted to protest, you have called them subversives and kidnapped entire delegations of union representatives who sometimes turned up dead, and other times did not turn up at all.<sup>18</sup>

The results of these policies have been devastating. During this first year of government, consumption of food has decreased by 40 percent, consumption of clothing by more than 50 percent, and the consumption of medicine is practically at zero among the lower class. There are already regions in Greater Buenos Aires where the infant mortality rate is above 30 percent, a figure which places us on par with Rhodesia, Dahomey, or the Guayanas. The incidence of diseases like Summer Diarrhea, parasitosis, and even rabies has climbed to meet world records and has even surpassed them. As if these were desirable and sought-after goals, you have reduced the public health budget to less than a third of military spending, shutting down even the free hospitals while hundreds of doctors, medical professionals, and technicians join the exodus provoked by terror, low wages, or "rationalization."

You only have to walk around Greater Buenos Aires for a few hours before quickly realizing that these policies are turning it into a slum with ten million inhabitants. Cities in semi-darkness; entire neighborhoods with no running water because the monopolies rob them of their groundwater tables; thousands of blocks turned into one big pothole because you only pave military neighborhoods and decorate the Plaza de Mayo; the biggest river in the world is contaminated in all of its beaches because Minister Martinez de Hoz's associates are sloughing their industrial waste into it, and the only government measure you have taken is to ban people from bathing.

You have not been much wiser it comes to the abstract goals of the economy, which you tend to call "the country." A decrease in the gross national product of around 3 percent, a foreign debt reaching \$600 dollars per inhabitant, an annual inflation rate of 400 percent, a 9 percent increase in the money supply within a single week in December, a low of 13 percent in foreign investment—these are also world records, strange fruit born of cold calculation and severe incompetence.

While all the constructive and protective functions of the state atrophy and dissolve into pure anemia, only one is clearly thriving. One billion eight hundred million dollars—the equivalent of half of Argentina's exports—have been budgeted for Security and Defense in 1977. That there are four thousand new officer positions in the Federal Police and twelve thousand in the Province of Buenos Aires offering salaries that are double that of an industrial worker and triple that of a school principal—while military wages have secretly increased by 120 percent since February—proves that there is no salary freezing or unemployment in the kingdom of torture and death. This is the only Argentine business where the product is growing and where the price per slain guerrilla is rising faster than the dollar.

**6.** The economic policies of this Junta—which follow the formula of the International Monetary Fund that has been applied indiscriminately to Zaire and Chile, to Uruguay and Indonesia—recognize only the following as beneficiaries: the old ranchers' oligarchy; the new speculating oligarchy; and a select group of international monopolies headed by ITT, Esso, the automobile industry, US Steel, and Siemens, which Minister Martinez de Hoz and his entire cabinet have personal ties to. <sup>19</sup>

A 722 percent increase in the prices of animal products in 1976 illustrates the scale of a return to oligarchy, launched by Martinez de Hoz, that is consistent with the creed of the Sociedad Rural as stated by its president, Celedonio Pereda: "It is very surprising that certain small but active groups keep insisting that food should be affordable."<sup>20</sup>

The spectacle of a Stock Exchange where, within one week, some have enjoyed 100- and 200 percent gains without working; where there are companies that doubled their capital overnight without producing any more than before; where the crazy wheel of speculation spins in dollars, letters, adjustable values, and simple usury calculates interest on an hourly basis—it all seems rather strange, considering that this government came in to put a stop to the "feast of the corrupt." By privatizing banks, you are placing the savings and credit of the country in the hands of foreign banks; by indemnifying ITT and Siemens, you are rewarding companies that swindled the State; by reinstalling fueling stations, you are raising Shell's and Esso's returns; by lowering customs tariffs, you are creating jobs in Hong Kong or Singapore and unemployment in Argentina. Faced with all these facts, you have to ask yourself: Who are the unpatriotic people being referred, to in the official press releases? Where are the mercenaries who are working for foreign interests? Which ideology is the one threatening the nation?

Even if the overwhelming propaganda—a distorted reflection of the evil acts being committed—were not trying to argue that this Junta wants peace, that General Videla is a defender of human rights, or that Admiral Massera loves life, it would still be worth asking the Commanders-in-Chief of the 3 Branches to meditate on the abyss they are leading the country into under the pretense of winning a war. In this war, even killing the last guerrilla would do nothing more than make it start up again in

new ways, because the reasons that have been motivating the Argentine people's resistance for more than twenty years will not disappear but will instead be aggravated by the memory of the havoc that has been wreaked and by the revelation of the atrocities that have been committed.

These are the thoughts I wanted to pass on to the members of this Junta on the first anniversary of your ill-fated government, with no hope of being heard, with the certainty of being persecuted, but faithful to the commitment I made a long time ago to bear witness during difficult times.

Rodolfo Walsh. -I.D. 2845022  
Buenos Aires, March 24, 1977

In 1976, in response to censorship imposed by the military dictatorship, Walsh had created ANCLA, (Clandestine News Agency), and the "Information Chain", a system of hand-to-hand information distribution whose leaflets stated in the heading:

Quote:

*"Reproduce this information, circulate it by any means at your disposal: by hand, by machine, by mimeograph, orally. Send copies to your friends: nine out of ten are waiting for them. Millions want to be informed. Terror is based on lack of communication. Break the isolation. Feel again the moral satisfaction of an act of freedom. Defeat the terror. Circulate this information."*

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- 1. Walsh's younger daughter, Maria Victoria ("Vicki") Walsh, was a journalist who became involved with the Montonero movement even before her father did. She died on her twenty-sixth birthday, September 28, 1976, in a shootout. With her group on the rooftop of a house entirely outnumbered by over a hundred men and a tank on the ground, she chose to take her own life. Walsh writes further of Vicki's death and his feelings of loss in two letters, both published in 1976: "Carta a Vicki" ("Letter to Vicki") and "Carta a mis amigos" ("Letter to My Friends").
  - 2. Maria Estela ("Isabel" or "Isabelita") Martinez was Juan Peron's third and final wife. She served first as his vice president from 1973 to 1974 and, after her husband's death in 1974, as the interim President of Argentina until the military coup of March 24, 1976.
  - 3. In January 1977, the Junta began publishing incomplete lists of new prisoners and of those "released," the majority of whom were not actually released; they have been charged and are no longer under the Junta's jurisdiction, but remain in jail. The names of thousands of prisoners are still a military secret and the conditions that allow for their torture and subsequent execution remain unchanged.
  - 4. The Peronist leader Jorge Lizaso was skinned alive; a former member of Congress, Mario Amaya, was beaten to death, and the former member of Congress Muniz Barreto had his neck broken in one blow. One survivor's testimony: "Picana on my arms, hands, thighs, near my mouth every time I cried or prayed ... Every twenty minutes they would open the door and you could hear the saw machine they said they'd use to make cold cuts out of me."
  - 5. Cadena Informativa, message No.4, February 1977.
  - 6. A precise version of events appears in this letter from the prisoners at the Remand Center to the Bishop of Cordoba, Monsignor Primatesta: "On May 17, five fellow prisoners are taken out under the pretext of a trip to the infirmary and then executed: Miguel Angel Mosse, Jose Svaguza, Diana Fidelman, Luis Veron, Ricardo Yung, and Eduardo Hernandez. The Third Army Corps reported that they died in an attempted escape. On May 29, Jose Puchet and Carlos Sgadurra are taken out. The latter had been punished for not being able to stand on his feet, as he had suffered a number of broken bones. Later they are also reported as having been executed in an attempted escape."
  - 7. During the first fifteen days of military government, sixty-three bodies turned up, according to the papers. This makes for an annual projection of fifteen hundred. The assumption that the number could double is based both on the fact that since January 1976, the data in the press's

hands has been incomplete, and also on the fact that there has been a general increase in repression since the coup. What follows is a plausible overall estimate of the number of deaths caused by the Junta. Dead in combat: six hundred. Executed: thirteen hundred. Executed in secret: two thousand. Miscellaneous: one hundred. Total: four thousand.

- **8.** Letter from Isaias Zanotti, circulated by ANCLA, the Agencia de Noticias Clandestina (Clandestine News Agency). Walsh founded this underground news agency in June of 1976, less than a year before his death, in response to the increasingly limited access to information regarding State terrorism and corruption in Argentina.
- **9.** A "program" run by Admiral Mariani, Head of the First Aerial Brigade of Palomar, between July and December of 1976. They used Fokker F-Z7 planes.
- **10.** Jose Lopez Rega was appointed Minister of Social Welfare in 1973 under Peron; after Peron's death, Lopez Rega became the heart of Isabel Martinez de Peron's political program. The Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina—Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) was a facet of this program: throughout the 1970s, its death squads sought out and eradicated elements of the Left or any suspected enemies of the State. General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Brigadier General Orlando Ramon Agosti were responsible for the military coup that ousted Isabel Martinez de Peron in 1976. Videla then served as the de facto President of Argentina from 1976 to 1981, overseeing one of the most brutal eras in the country's history.
- **11.** Foreign Minister Vice Admiral Guzzetti admitted in an article published by La Opinion on October 3, 1976, that "the terrorism of the right is not terrorism as such" but rather "an antibody."
- **12.** General Prats, President Allende's last Defense Minister, killed by a bomb in September 1974. The former Uruguayan members of parliament Michelini and Gutierrez Ruiz were found riddled with bullets on May 2, 1976. The body of General Torres, former president of Bolivia, turned up on June 2, 1976, after General Harguindeguy, Isabel Martinez's Minister of Interior and former Chief of Police, accused him of "faking" his kidnapping.
- **13.** Libertadores de America Society This Argentine death squad was similar in nature to Lopez Rega's Triple A and was responsible for hundreds of deaths during the 1970s.
- **14.** Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz was Minister of the Economy during the years that Videla served as de facto president. He is known for leading Argentina in the direction of less state intervention in the economy and more free-market capitalism. He froze wages in an effort to decrease inflation, but in doing so brought on heavy speculation and social unrest. He maintained relationships with foreign investors abroad, and was criticized for depending too heavily on foreign investments, loans, corporations, and big money, while neglecting the effects of his ambitious economic decisions on the welfare of the middle class. One of his lasting legacies was an enormous increase in Argentine foreign debt.
- **15.** Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Ildebrando Pascarelli, according to La Razon on June 12, 1976. Chief of the First Artillery Group of Ciudadela, Pascarelli is the one allegedly responsible for thirty-three executions that took place between January 5 and February 3 of 1977.
- **16.** Swiss Banks Union data from June 1976. The situation grew even worse after ward.
- **17.** Clarin newspaper
- **18.** Among the national leaders who were kidnapped are Mario Aguirre of ATE, Jorge Di Pasqual of Farmacia, Oscar Smith of Luz y Fuerza. The number of union leaders from metal and naval industries who have been kidnapped and murdered has been particularly high.
- **19.** Martinez de Hoz's 1976 policy was similar to the formula prescribed by the IMF that Walsh mentions here. The general idea was to restructure the State's economic program, cutting down on domestic spending and any State regulation, to allow for growth through the international economy. The old ranchers' oligarchy ("oligarquia ganadera") refers to cattle-ranching families that owned Argentine land and gained high social status starting in the nineteenth century. De Hoz himself came from such a family.
- **20.** Prensa Libre, December 16, 1976.