



The Dark Side of Democracy: A Decolonial Feminist Investigation of Declassified CIA Documents on Argentina's 1976–1983 Dictatorship

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ABSTRACT

The United States frames Latin America as both dependent on Western progress and a threat to hemispheric peace. This study examines U.S.–Argentine relations, focusing on how international and domestic policies intersected through U.S. perspectives. Using Anibal Quijano's "coloniality" and decolonial feminist theory, it explores the enduring power hierarchies rooted in European colonization and U.S. imperialism, which intersect with patriarchy to sustain oppression. U.S. military interventions, such as the School of the Americas and Operation Condor, illustrate how stigmatized perceptions shaped violent policies supporting Latin American dictatorships. Specifically, during Argentina's 1976 dictatorship, U.S. influence contributed to systemic violence, including the disappearance of 30,000 individuals. Declassified U.S. documents reveal the rhetoric justifying these actions under the guise of democracy and freedom. This analysis critiques Western democracy by exposing its complicity in humanitarian crimes through language that legitimized exploitation and control over Latin America.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States (U.S.) military has long framed itself as a defender of freedom and human rights globally, even as its actions have been associated with violations of those rights. This self-image is shaped in part by how the U.S. perceives other states. In the mid-twentieth century, Argentina was often viewed through the lens of a “dependent” relationship to the United States (Cottam 18). This dependent image reflects a dynamic in which “the more powerful country [has] the tendency to use that power exploitatively” (Cottam 22). From a feminist perspective, patterns of exploitation rooted in colonial power structures contributed to the U.S. positioning itself as a patriarchal authority in the Americas, casting itself as both protector of Western values, including capitalism, and enforcer of its foreign policy priorities in the region.

During the Cold War, the rise of labor and peasant movements (Esparza 5) coincided with broader social discontent and demands for expanded rights (McSherry 1). Argentine social leaders linked “underdevelopment” to neocolonial practices and called for greater control over economic and political structures (McSherry 2). These demands, however, were interpreted within a geopolitical framework in which shifts in influence were understood in zero-sum terms: perceived losses for the United States were often equated with gains for the USSR. As a result, efforts to challenge “traditional relations” that positioned Argentina as dependent were frequently viewed not as autonomous political movements but as steps toward Soviet alignment (Cottam 25). These perceptions informed U.S. policy concerns and contributed to representations of Argentinians as “terrorists” or “subversive” when they diverged from U.S. foreign policy objectives. U.S. anti-communist policies in Latin America can be examined through the case of U.S.–Argentina relations in the latter half of the twentieth century. Within a broader context of colonial legacies, patterns of stigmatization of Indigenous and working-class populations, and U.S. intervention, the 1976–1983 Argentine dictatorship provides a focused case through which to analyze these dynamics.

Between 2016 and 2019, the U.S. Department of State declassified approximately 11,600 documents pertaining to human rights abuses in Argentina between 1975 and 1983 (Argentina 2023). This expanded access creates new opportunities for analysis, particularly within decolonial feminist scholarship. The documents suggest that U.S. military and intelligence activities operated alongside broader policy objectives, while the language used to describe Argentina—such as “ineptness,” “inefficiency,” and “corruption” (Cottam 1994, 23)—shapes how policy was understood and implemented.

This raises the question: how do U.S. intelligence documents construct Argentina as a “subversive” or “terrorist” threat, and what does this reveal about the intersection of colonial and patriarchal power in U.S. foreign policy? Through thematic analysis of selected declassified CIA documents, this paper develops a framework for examining how such discourses reflect and reinforce broader ideological structures.

This study contributes to scholarship on U.S. foreign policy and intervention by engaging newly available archival material. As these documents have only recently been released, their contents remain underexplored. In addition, applying a decolonial feminist lens highlights how gendered and colonial logics shape intelligence discourse, altering U.S., and, by extension, Argentine military practices. The analysis also considers how the classification of individuals as “subversive” appears across both U.S. intelligence discourse and the language used during the dictatorship. U.S. intelligence communications suggest something inherently dangerous about Argentinians unless they are specifically aligned with U.S. foreign policy objectives. The Argentine dictatorship, which disappeared more than 30,000 people, appears to have drawn on similar classifications in defining who was considered subversive.

By examining U.S. policy structures in Argentina through the lens of how “racism, homophobia, colonialism and classism” intersect (Curiel and Galindo 2015, 17), this analysis shows how U.S. interventionism can function as a method of control rather than solely as a project of democratization or freedom, as official narratives may suggest (Lajtmán et al. 2026, 24). A close reading of previously classified CIA documents highlights how the U.S.’s enemy dependent narrative of Argentina intersects with colonial and patriarchal power in U.S. foreign policy.

This paper is divided into five sections. It begins with a review of existing literature on U.S. interventionism in Latin America during the Cold War, followed by a theoretical discussion of decolonial feminist theory and its development in relation to earlier feminist approaches. This section also briefly addresses debates surrounding the classification of the violence as genocide versus crimes against humanity. The third section outlines the methodology, including the coding of key terms such as “terrorist” and “subversive,” as well as patterns of economic and political attribution. The fourth section presents the analysis, organized into four themes: “Subversive and Terrorist Enemies,” “Economic Dominance,” “Political Concerns about Human Rights Violations,” and “Permissive Attitudes toward Violence.” Through these themes, the analysis reveals how U.S. discourse contributed to framing Argentina and its population within hierarchical and exclusionary structures.

THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE BACKGROUND

I begin with a brief theoretical and literature background as it relates to the U.S.–Argentina relationship during the 1976–1983 time frame. I first outline the emergence of Decolonial Feminist Theory (DFT) from Critical Feminist Theory (CFT), emphasizing its focus on the intersection of gender and colonial hierarchies. I then turn to debates on the definition of genocide, arguing that the violence in Argentina has not been categorized as such due to political machinations. I conclude the section with a history of U.S. foreign policy in Argentina immediately preceding the dictatorship. This overview does not encompass the full scope of arguments on DFT or the definitions of genocide, but instead offers a high-level account as it directly relates to my paper.

DECONONIAL FEMINIST THEORY

To examine the U.S.’s patriarchal and colonial influence on Argentina’s domestic policy, I draw on critical decolonial feminist theory (DFT). Critical feminist theory (CFT) examines how social, political, and epistemological structures shaped under patriarchy can produce unequal outcomes across different experiences of marginalization. While often associated with gender, CFT more broadly addresses power disparities that emerge within a patriarchal global order. Latin American feminists extend this critique to colonial structures by challenging Western feminist frameworks and linking gendered domination to histories of colonial exploitation. In doing so, they question the assumptions, logics, and meanings embedded in institutions associated with Western “freedom,” including the U.S. government (Curiel and Galindo 2015, 8). Decolonial feminism, in turn, emphasizes the persistence of structural inequalities in formally postcolonial contexts (Féron and Väyrynen 2024, 97), offering a lens through which Argentina can be situated.

The overlap between these hierarchies can be understood through the ways U.S. influence in the region has been interpreted. U.S. policymakers at times characterized Argentina as “dependent” (Cottam 1994, 18), a framing that reflects both colonial and gendered hierarchies. In this interpretation, the U.S. directed outcomes and benefited from these decisions, while Argentina’s position was often described in terms of alignment with U.S. priorities. This relationship has been framed as one in which Argentina received protection contingent on adherence to U.S. doctrine, rather than recognition as an equal actor.

DFT contributes to this analysis by foregrounding how processes of othering and hierarchy may be articulated through both colonial and patriarchal logics. Rather than assuming a direct equivalence, it suggests that gendered metaphors—such as the association of masculinity with

authority and femininity with subordination—can shape how power is conceptualized in international relations. This perspective also draws attention to how broader structures are reflected in everyday practices, including bureaucratic language and documentation. The selection and framing of such jingoistic language can indicate how certain actors are positioned as requiring protection, guidance, or control, and how these distinctions are reproduced across institutional contexts.

A GENOCIDE IN ARGENTINA

While the debate over how to define genocide—and what forms of violence fall within it—is deeply contested and political, I engage with it briefly here. I refer to the violence in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 as a genocide of the political left, while recognizing that Argentine legal and scholarly frameworks predominantly define it as crimes against humanity. My position is informed by the work of Daniel Feierstein, who conceptualizes genocide not only as a tool of annihilation but also as a process aimed at the destruction of social groups and the reorganization of society (Silveyra and Feierstein 2020, 19). In this sense, the distinction between genocide and crimes against humanity is not only legal but also social, shaping processes of memory, accountability, and reconciliation (Silveyra and Feierstein 2020, 21). It is this social dimension that informs ongoing debates over terminology in the Argentine case.

According to the official United Nations definition, the violence during the dictatorship does not fall under genocide, as political identity is not included among protected groups (Jones 2006, 13). Instead, it aligns more closely with politicide, defined as the mass killing of individuals based on political affiliation (Jones 2006, 309). During the dictatorship, the designation of “enemy” remained broad, often encompassing those perceived to oppose the regime or fall outside its political alignment. Authorities expressed concern that “political-social subversion” could spread through social, economic, and political movements (Henríquez and Figallo 2023, 247), and some accounts describe efforts to eliminate segments of political leadership in the context of broader economic restructuring (Esparza 2011, 6).

At the same time, the definition of genocide itself has been historically contested. Early drafts of the Genocide Convention included political groups, but this category was ultimately excluded following opposition from states including the United States (Lemkin 2008; UN Secretary-General 1947). This exclusion continues to shape how different forms of violence are categorized and addressed.

The naming of violence, as well as the characterization of its victims, influences the level of international attention it receives. For instance, politicide is typically addressed within human rights frameworks, while genocide falls under international criminal law (Blau and Esparza 2016,

119). In cases where the U.S. was involved in forms of large-scale violence—and where it played a role in shaping legal definitions—it becomes important to consider how naming practices affect recognition and accountability. I use the term genocide to emphasize these stakes, while acknowledging that this choice reflects a particular interpretive position rather than a legal consensus. Claims that alternative classifications minimize the severity of the violence or that definitional exclusions were aimed at obscuring violence the U.S. was involved in reflect one strand of this debate and remain contested.

This analysis is grounded in a rhetorical examination of how U.S. intelligence organizations categorized the “other”—in this case, Argentina. Processes of “othering” can be understood as an initial stage in what Feierstein describes as “stigmatization” (Brinham 2024, 155), in which certain groups are positioned outside normative social boundaries. Individuals or groups identified in this way may be framed as threats or as transgressors of social order (Leone 2020). In U.S. discourse, Argentina was at times represented as a potential threat within a broader Cold War framework, positioned outside a category of “safe” or aligned states. Terms such as “enemy,” “subversive,” and “terrorist” were used in ways that carried specific political and moral connotations. “Subversive” suggests an attempt to undermine established institutions, while “terrorist” implies the use of violence for political purposes. These labels have been applied across different historical contexts, often to groups challenging existing power structures.

The use of this language is not neutral. While processes of othering do not in themselves produce large-scale violence, they can contribute to broader trajectories that include isolation, militarization, and the normalization of coercive practices (Leone 2020; Feierstein 2019). In this sense, the documents’ framing of Argentina and its population can be read as portraying them as threats and, in some interpretations, as contributing to justifications for repression.

The Argentine case has been interpreted by some scholars as reflecting a systematic and politically motivated strategy of repression within a broader Cold War context (Actis 2006, xxi). Analyses often emphasize the role of ideological conflict, international alignments, and domestic political dynamics in shaping these processes. Within this framework, U.S. and Argentine policies have been described as targeting leftist movements perceived as threats to existing political and economic structures. Interpretations that frame this as a coordinated effort to remove all opposition or as reflecting broader neoliberal objectives represent one perspective within an ongoing scholarly debate.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN ARGENTINA

Historical analyses often trace the roots of interventionist violence in Argentina to colonization; U.S. neocolonialism

in the 20th century continues patterns of patriarchal foreign policy overreach by Western countries. *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America*, edited by Marcia Esparza (2011), situates Argentina’s violence within both colonial legacies and Cold War geopolitics. In the following section, I connect U.S. neocolonial interests in Argentina to patterns of violence aimed at maintaining U.S. dominance and Argentinian subservience.

Martha Cottam (1994) provides a framework for understanding how U.S. policymakers perceived and interacted with Latin America. As Cottam explains, imperial ideologies produced one-dimensional, nationalistic perceptions that justified violence toward “enemy dependents”—in this case, Argentina (Cottam 1994, 18). Ernesto Bohoslavsky and Mariana Franco connect the scale of state terrorism during this period to earlier forms of violence such as colonialism (Bohoslavsky and Franco 2020, 207). As a result of this “enemy-dependent” framing, the U.S. viewed Argentina as subordinate in multiple domains, and shifts in this relationship were often interpreted as potential threats. In this context, Argentina’s domestic instability intersected with U.S. political objectives, at times contributing to conditions in which a weakened Argentina aligned with U.S. interests.

The Perón governments leading up to the dictatorship were strong, though at times unpredictable, partners in U.S. economic strategies (Prizel 1990, 171–172). A strong Perón government enabled continuity in the bilateral relationship, particularly where ruling elites maintained their position. This included policies emphasizing alignment with U.S. political and economic priorities (Cottam 1994, 18–22; Curiel and Galindo 2015, 20), which continued economic benefits for U.S. companies and reinforced cooperation at the state level. Argentina’s agreement to form a “South Atlantic military bloc” with the U.S. illustrates the constraints shaping Argentine sovereignty within this relationship (Prizel 1990, 174; de Almeida 2013).

Operation Condor exemplified this interventionist strategy in the form of coordinated military and intelligence activity. Described as a project of “total transformation of cultures and social formations” (Curiel and Galindo 2015, 21), Condor functioned as a transnational system through which South American regimes coordinated surveillance, detention, and repression of political opponents (McSherry 2011, 21). The prioritization of anti-communist alignment over human rights facilitated widespread repression against those labeled “subversive.” These individuals were often targeted because they were perceived as threats to existing political and economic arrangements in both Argentina and the U.S. Scholars such as McPherson, McSherry, and Winer highlight the structural, transnational, and discursive dimensions of this system. U.S. involvement included military training programs such as the School of the Americas and Mobile

Training Teams, which contributed to conditions in which coups and repression became more likely (Sabato 1987, 266; McSherry 2011, 10; Schmidli 2013, 3). Intervention through Operation Condor and related policies helped create conditions that enabled the Argentine dictatorship to consolidate power.

During the Cold War, the U.S. often framed political and social mobilization in Argentina as potential communist threats. Labor and peasant movements, economic change, and demands for autonomy were frequently interpreted through a Cold War lens as possible alignment with the USSR (Cottam 1994, 25; Esparza 2011, 5; McPherson 2011, 70). Cuban Revolution reinforced perceptions that social mobilization could be “subversive or potentially subversive” (McSherry 2011, 3), shaping U.S. responses in the region. Scholars such as Prizel and Schmidli show how ideological competition informed U.S. policy, while Esparza situated these dynamics within broader patterns of economic and geopolitical influence. Together, this literature outlines the context in which U.S. intervention aligned with systems of repression.

Following the military coup on 24 March 1976 led by Jorge Rafael Videla, the regime targeted “subversives” under the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (PRN), often justified through narratives of national security and economic development (Winer 2015, 129). The integration of legal and penal systems into the PRN structure facilitated the expansion of state repression (Bohoslavsky and Franco 2020, 210). As this system consolidated, military force was increasingly used in the disappearance of those labeled as subversive. A defining feature of the regime was *los desaparecidos*—individuals who were detained, tortured, and disappeared (Timerman 1981, 50; Actis 2006, xvi). The *Nunca Más* report (1984) identified systematic repression targeting primarily young adults, including workers and students, illustrating how social activism was often equated with political threat (Sabato 1987, 8, 294; Winer 2015, 125).

Jingoistic rhetoric in foreign policy further shaped the justification and continuation of U.S. intervention. Presidential discourse from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan emphasized military strength and hemispheric control, though with variation in tone and emphasis. Jimmy Carter publicly foregrounded human rights while maintaining certain forms of cooperation with Argentina (Lowenthal 1991, 144), while Reagan promoted conservative military and economic policies without prioritizing human rights conditionality (Prizel 1990, 174; Curiel and Galindo 2015, 20). Analysis of declassified documents, however, allows for comparison between public rhetoric and internal communication, revealing patterns that can be interpreted as reflecting underlying ideological assumptions shaping U.S. foreign policy.

This project approaches Argentina as a case study within a broader network of countries whose governments operated in close relationship with U.S.

influence. Examining these interactions provides insight into patterns of state-facilitated violence in the 20th century and their possible continuities. It also highlights how preexisting assumptions may have shaped decisions toward military and coercive strategies. Through analysis of historical context and declassified materials, this study argues that U.S. intelligence institutions played a significant role in enabling the Argentine dictatorship through military, economic, and ideological forms of involvement aligned with U.S. foreign policy objectives.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological process of this analysis began with the selection of the case study. Argentina was selected due to the volume and accessibility of declassified documents, specifically the Argentina Declassification Project, which emerged alongside high levels of human rights activism and post-dictatorship legal accountability (Kornbluh 2019; Rise 1993). Additionally, Argentina as a case study offered the opportunity to conduct original research, as these documents have not been widely analyzed, in part due to their relatively recent availability. Prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), more than 11,600 documents were declassified during the Donald Trump administration (Kornbluh 2019; Argentina 2023) and made available through the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room Database. Although collated for public access, the sheer number of documents makes the information difficult to process. In contrast to public addresses, these documents were not intended for public audiences; they are often less shaped by public-facing political considerations or rhetorical framing (Schenquer and Risler 2018, 44). A thematic and rhetorical analysis of these materials therefore provides a way to examine the patriarchal and colonial dimensions of U.S. policy.

I selected documents that represent U.S. intelligence agencies’ and bureaucracies’ perspectives toward Argentina from 1976 through the end of the dictatorship. The final list was based on the following criteria: falling within the dates 1976–1984, containing uncensored or minimally redacted information, and offering material that was not redundant with other selected documents. I also prioritized documents with substantial analyzable text, excluding those that were heavily censored, only tangentially referenced Argentina, or contained minimal content. In total, 20 documents met these criteria.

Next, I read each document to develop a general understanding of the collection and noted recurring ideas, including attribution of blame for economic conditions, the degree to which actions aligned with U.S. policy, and the repeated use of terms such as “subversive” and “terrorist.” This stage of coding involved identifying and gathering relevant textual elements, including recurring

themes and key moments, to guide interpretation (Shelton et al. 2025, 28). Based on this initial reading, I developed a set of thematic categories and organized them into a table with separate columns for La Junta, the Argentine government during the dictatorship, and the Left. The category “Left” is intentionally broad, reflecting the similarly broad and often ambiguous way opposition groups were described in the documents. The resulting labels and definitions are listed below.

I then re-read each document using these themes, coding instances and producing a numerical count of how often each theme appeared. Consistent definitions were used across documents to maintain coherence in the coding process. The aggregated results are presented in Chart 1. For example, in *Contents REDACTED on Operation Condor*, the Left was labeled “terrorist” or “subversive” six times, while in *Latin America Weekly Review*, 25 November 1977: *Insurgency and Terrorism in Latin America*, it appeared 26 times. In *Steps to Improve U.S.-Argentine Relations*, La Junta was coded as a secondary actor 20 times, whereas in *Argentina: Assessment of Current Human Rights Situation* it appeared as a secondary actor 10 times and as a primary

actor twice. The categories “terrorist/subversive” and “Direct Reference to Compatibility with U.S. Politics” were applied only to the Left and La Junta, respectively, as no instances appeared in the inverse.

Because of the interpretive nature of coding, these results are analytical rather than statistical. However, they help identify patterns in how jingoistic language is used and how relationships of power and responsibility are constructed. In this sense, the coding highlights how U.S. documents frame Argentina, and how these representations may shape interpretations of power, rights, and relations with the “other”.

Author’s aggregated analysis of 20 declassified U.S. intelligence documents from the Argentina Declassification Project (1976–1984). Frequencies derived from thematic analysis conducted by the author using predefined codes.

- i. La Junta – Human Rights Positive: Portrays the Argentine government as improving or benefiting human rights conditions.
- ii. Left – “Terrorist”/“Subversive”: Describes the political Left using the terms “terrorist” or “subversive.”

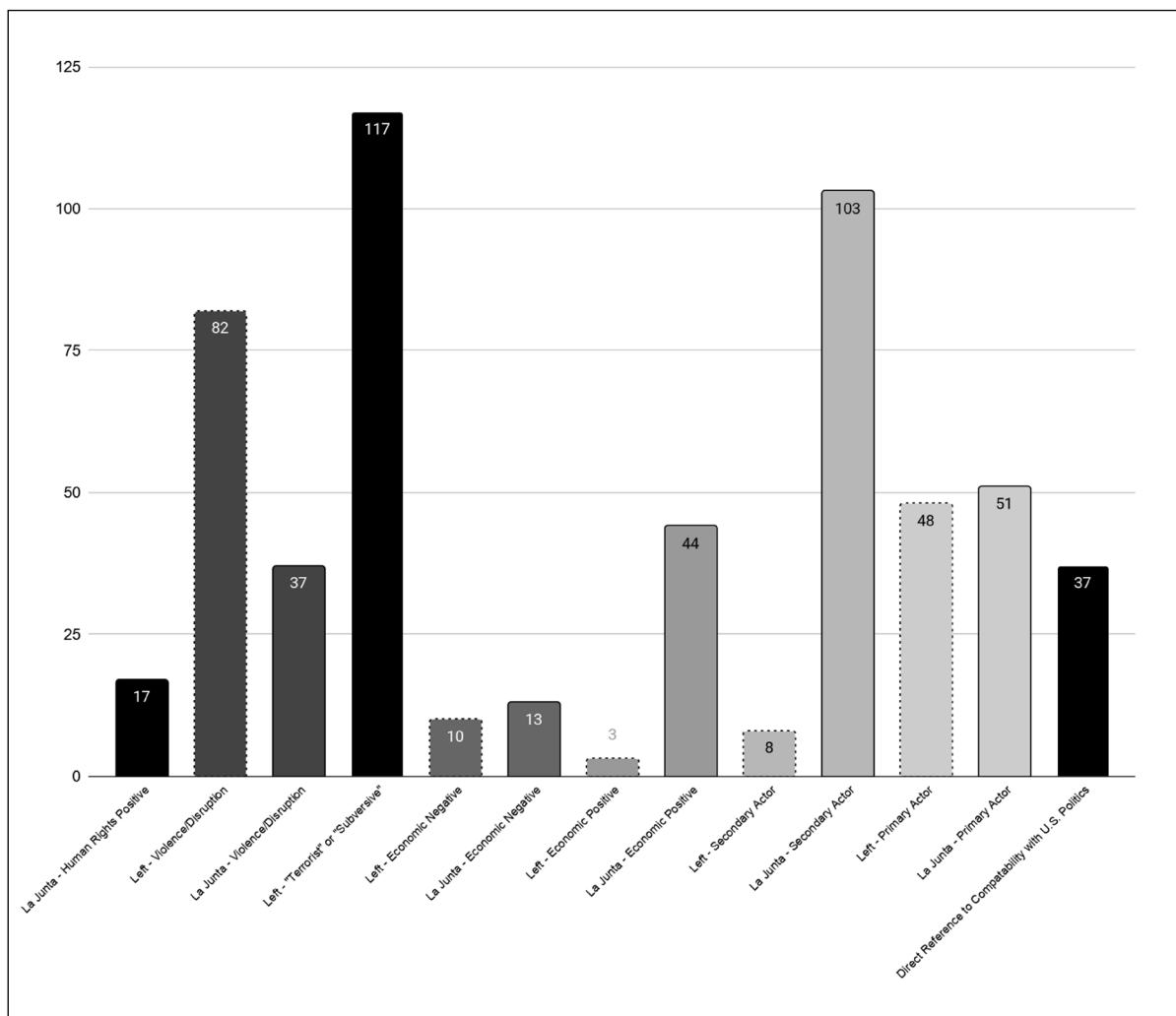


Chart 1 Total Instances of Descriptive Characteristics of the “Left” and “La Junta” within Selected Declassified Documents.

- iii. Violence/Disruption: Links an entity to acts of violence or to causing social or sectoral division.
- iv. Economic Negative: Attributes negative economic impact to the entity (e.g., policy, employment, national economy).
- v. Economic Positive: Attributes positive economic impact to the entity (e.g., policy, employment, broader economy).
- vi. Secondary Actor: Depicts the entity as reactive or dependent, not generating proactive policy and not directly responsible for outcomes.
- vii. Primary Actor: Depicts the entity as actively advancing policy objectives and directly responsible for resulting actions.
- viii. Compatibility with U.S. Politics: Makes a direct connection between an action and its implications for U.S. domestic or international policy objectives.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of U.S. intelligence documents portrays Argentina, and thus Argentinians, as a “subversive” and “terrorist” threat potentially positioned as deserving of violence. Under a shared goal of suppressing social transformation in favor of the worker, La Junta and the U.S. have been interpreted as participating in a form of political genocide against the left. The identified codes for the role of the U.S. in the Argentine Dictatorship show how trends of control and hierarchy perpetuate problematic stereotypes and norms. For example, classifying someone as “subversive” necessarily designates them as outside the rights guaranteed within a democracy. When the U.S. designates someone as such, it implies the other as violent, barbaric, and in need of discipline. Within the DFT analytical framework, the U.S. becomes the putative patriarch upholding unequal power over Argentina.

Analysis of the selected declassified documents reveals how U.S. national security doctrine can be read as promoting violence through jingoistic language—a “dirty war” to be won at all costs (McSherry, 2011, p. 17). Nixon and Kissinger agreed that the most effective tool for stability in LA was the military (McPherson, 2011, p. 74), and this is supported by the high use of violence in the documents. By providing training, military technology, and strategic guidance, the U.S. positioned Argentina as a dependent entity influenced by the presence of U.S. conditional support. DFT highlights that patriarchal structures in the U.S. and Argentina normalized exploitation (Braithwaite and Schrod, 2022, 205). Aligned with Argentina’s elite, the U.S. pursued a mission to establish a neoliberal, capitalist order by eliminating “undesirables” (Henríquez and Figallo 2023).

The rhetoric and policies used in U.S. intelligence documents to describe and shape policy in Argentina

can be classified into four categories: classification of the political left as subversive and terrorist enemies; an overarching objective of economic dominance; political concern around publicization of human rights violations in Argentina; and general permissive attitudes towards violence. In the following section, I will present the case for each of these four themes in the declassified documents, before exploring their collective implications in the Conclusion. While U.S. policymakers may not have condoned every action, their controlling policies *may have contributed to conditions for large-scale violence*, reinforcing patriarchal and colonial hierarchies while supporting U.S. foreign policy.

SUBVERSIVE AND TERRORIST ENEMIES

The classification of Argentina as a dependent enemy shapes the range of options available to the U.S. intelligence community for advancing foreign policy outcomes. Argentina’s social movements in the 1970s were interpreted through this lens, reflected in the repeated use of “subversive” and “terrorist” to characterize revolutionaries. The document *Creation of a New Countersubversive Unit Within Federal Police Security (1977)* illustrates this framing, with agents “maintaining surveillance of an alleged subversive or on a subversive’s home to acquire additional data, such as the identity of a subversive’s contacts” (4). There is little evidence connecting support for liberal economic policies to violent behavior; however, the label of subversive appears to permit human rights violations against those categorized as such.

The *Latin America Weekly Review*, 25 November 1977 further demonstrates the repeated use of “terrorist” and “subversive,” with the terms appearing 26 times. Across the 20 documents, [Chart 1](#) shows these terms appear 117 times. The report includes a full-page caricature of an armed insurgent and frames leftist movements as inherently violent, noting that the edition is “devoted entirely to the question of leftist terrorism and insurgency in the hemisphere” (1977, p. 1). This discourse contrasts with internal objectives. While *Steps to Improve US–Argentine Relations (1980)* proposes improved relations, a handwritten note—“Ed—good ideas. Some process should be followed with other difficult countries. J.”—suggests a more disciplinary framing. Argentina is thus portrayed as a difficult dependent rather than an equal partner. Through a DFT lens, this reflects a hierarchical relationship in which a global power disciplines a subordinate state. The repeated use of “terrorist” and “subversive” suggests that Argentina and its population are framed as requiring order within a Western ideological framework.

The report also links indigeneity to violence by recounting colonial uprisings as irrational: “During the colonial period, there were sporadic Indian uprisings

undertaken in the name of human and political rights against the various local governments” (1977, p. 6). It connects modern independence movements to these earlier uprisings, contributing to their delegitimization. Indigenous resistance and the Montoneros’ human rights activism are placed in quotation marks, further distancing their claims: “The [Montoneros] now considers it is engaged in a ‘popular war’ against ‘the forces of repression and imperialism’” (1977, p. 15). The report presents the Montoneros’ “passive support” from the population as justification for eradication (1977, p. 16), reflecting alignment with the regime’s framing of repression. At the same time, it acknowledges that guerrilla groups had limited connection to Soviet communism (1977, p. 8), complicating dominant Cold War narratives.

From a DFT perspective, these dynamics reflect broader patterns of democratic double standards toward minority identities. Democracies emerging after independence often institutionalized forms of exclusion alongside espoused commitments to freedom. In this context, U.S. discourse helps define who is categorized as a terrorist or communist, which may in turn justify physical, rhetorical, and economic violence. This creates a framework in which democracy and freedom become contingent on the suppression of those labeled subversive, sustaining colonial hierarchies through the language of law and order.

ECONOMIC DOMINANCE

U.S. influence over Argentina persisted not only through physical violence but also through enduring economic dynamics. La Junta functioned less as a fully sovereign government and more as a constrained actor within U.S. interests; in the twenty documents reviewed, it was described as a secondary actor 103 times (Chart 1). This reflects the dependency that characterized U.S.–Argentina relations in the 20th century. *Argentina: Economic Progress Under the Junta* notes that under external economic pressure, Argentina “restructure[d] the onerous foreign debt and rebuild[ed] reserves. Breaking Argentine tradition, it approached the IMF [International Monetary Fund] as well as foreign banks for loans” (Chief, Latin American Branch, Developing Nations Division, 1978, p. 3). While presented as a neutral economic measure, U.S. involvement with the IMF appears to have shaped loan structures and contributed to longer-term dependency. Argentina lacked a concrete repayment plan, which further deepened this reliance. Despite praise—“The military government has restored Argentina’s international solvency and revived economic growth” (1978, p. 2)—these policies coincided with economic instability, the sale of Indigenous land, and increased reliance on foreign corporations. The U.S., rather than safeguarding Argentine sovereignty, appears

to have prioritized the stability of its own economic and political interests.

The *Memorandum for the Vice President regarding Meeting With President Videla of Argentina* (1977) further illustrates this prioritization. Addressing issues ranging from human rights to trade and helicopter sales, the document frames Argentina as reactive. Regarding nonparticipation in a joint U.S.–Latin American fleet exercise, it notes: “Their stated reason...is ‘difficulty in obtaining small parts’ for their ships. We believe it is a protest of our arms sales policy” (Clift, 1977, p. 5). This interpretation downplays Argentina’s stated reasoning and reinforces a framework in which Argentina is treated as dependent.

Similarly, *Argentina: The Resurgent Labor Movement* (1983) presents labor as a recurring challenge to U.S.-aligned economic and political priorities. Labor is described as “regaining its status as one of the nation’s foremost political forces...although weakened and factionized...labor is reorganizing” (Office of African and Latin American Analysis, 1983, p. 6). This framing positions labor as a persistent threat capable of disrupting economic stability. Concerns over U.S. banks’ exposure to Argentina’s foreign debt and risks to profit remittance and capital repatriation further highlight how economic dependence functioned as a mechanism of pressure (1983, p. 7).

U.S. policy appears to have operated within a framework in which economic and security objectives were closely aligned. Neocolonial national security priorities intersected with capitalist goals, as intervention was associated with efforts to eliminate barriers to economic liberalization (Esparza, 2011, p. 6; Féron and Väyrynen, 2024, p. 94). The dominant economic trend of the period, often associated with Reagan-era policies, emphasized free-market expansion and deregulation, at times alongside the suppression of leftist perspectives (Reagan, 2016). U.S. intelligence documents consistently emphasize Argentina’s political and economic alignment with U.S. objectives while giving less attention to humanitarian concerns. *The New Argentine Junta* reflects this pattern through its emphasis on the regime’s control and alignment with U.S. interests (Central Reference Service, 1976, p. 3). Within this framework, economic dependence can be understood as one mechanism through which influence was maintained, reinforcing hierarchical relations while sidelining human rights considerations.

POLITICAL CONCERNS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

U.S. intelligence documents suggest a limited prioritization of Argentinian human rights when weighed against U.S. foreign policy interests. Allowing “mass killings on the basis of imputed political affiliation” in Argentina (Jones,

2006, p. 209), while continuing economic and military support, may be read as tacit acceptance. The U.S. had the capacity to exert economic, social, and military pressure had it chosen to intervene more forcefully to curb violence. The Carter administration, often associated with a stronger emphasis on human rights, appears to have prioritized Argentina's reintegration into an anti-communist alliance alongside addressing reported violations (Bradley, 2021). U.S. and Argentine political and social hierarchies at times appear mutually reinforcing, particularly in their dismissal of opposition claims amid ongoing reports of torture and killings. Support for the regime, as reflected in the documents, appears to persist where it aligned with broader U.S. foreign policy objectives, suggesting that concern for human rights was not always the primary consideration.

Prepared by the Department of State in 1978, *Argentina: Assessment of Current Human Rights Situation* (declassified 1 October 2018) offers a clear example of U.S. intelligence perspectives on humanitarian conditions under the military regime. While the U.S. acknowledged it did “not know exactly how many people have been tortured or killed, how many are now being held prisoner, how many prisons are being used, etc.” (p. 2), this recognition nevertheless indicates awareness of state violence. At the same time, the report refers to the left as “terrorist” or “subversive” eleven times and notes that “approximately 2,900 persons purportedly guilty of security violations are being detained” (p. 2). This phrasing presents detainees as culpable, rather than foregrounding the regime's responsibility. Although the report acknowledges illegal detention, the characterization of detainees as “guilty” shapes how their treatment is interpreted.

Despite recognizing inconsistencies in detentions and repeated reports of human rights violations, including insufficiently justified arrests (p. 3), the U.S. continued its support of the regime (Christopher 1980). The report acknowledges torture and mistreatment but frames them as limited in scope or attributable to specific actors rather than systematic policy. Phrases such as “the program appears to be relatively small, encompassing at most a few hundred persons” (p. 3) and “reports of severe mistreatment are most often associated with specific military jurisdictions and prisons” (p. 4) diffuse responsibility away from the state. This framing allows Argentine leadership to be presented in more moderate terms, as in the statement: “Videla is not power hungry, but he is committed to the military government's reform program” (p. 9), which downplays his role in the coup.

Despite documented awareness of human rights violations and their scope, U.S. priorities appear to include maintaining economic interests alongside an international image of supporting democracy and freedom. This dynamic is reflected in the *National Intelligence Daily*,

11 August 1979, which notes “persistent rumors...that security forces are murdering political prisoners before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission visit next month” (p. 3). The report also acknowledges that “several secret detention centers may still exist...[and] between 500 and 2,000 so-called clandestine political prisoners may still be in secret camps” (p. 3). At the same time, concern appears tied to the potential implications for U.S. visibility and international standing, particularly in light of the upcoming visit.

A similar tension appears in the report that “a federal judge ordered police to raid the offices of three human rights organizations in Buenos Aires...[regarding] charges that one of the groups had solicited false information concerning a missing person” (p. 4). While presented as a factual account, the phrasing does not contextualize the broader reality of widespread disappearances or the challenges faced by human rights organizations seeking information. The reference to “false information” may shape perceptions of these organizations' credibility. Across the documents, the repeated classification of victims as “subversives” or “terrorists” contributes to a framing in which such individuals are more easily associated with legitimate targets of repression.

Concerns about the potential exposure of U.S. involvement appear to influence the degree of distance maintained from the regime. The 1982 *Causal Investigation of the Temporary Kidnapping of Foreign Journalists in Argentina* further illustrates this selective attention to human rights issues. The report notes that “no serious attempt is currently underway to identify and punish the persons responsible for the kidnapping of the journalists” (p. 3), suggesting that attention to these cases is linked to their international visibility. The case of journalist Jacobo Timerman highlights this dynamic: his international profile prompted U.S. attention, while many other victims received less recognition. In this context, responses to human rights violations appear uneven, with greater attention given where international scrutiny or geopolitical interests were at stake. The protection of regime actors and security personnel parallels this pattern, as institutional structures limited accountability and contributed to the persistence of violence.

PERMISSIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE

The previous thematic pattern—political concern over the exposure of human rights violations paired with jingoistic rhetoric—appears to normalize the use of extreme force against those misaligned with U.S. interests. When *Argentina: The Resurgent Labor Movement* reports that labor sought “continued progress toward the lifting of all government controls over union organizations... best achieved through democratization” (1983, 6), the U.S. response can be read as resistant to these shifts, suggesting that expanded democratic participation

at times conflicted with U.S. influence. In this sense, U.S. discourse helped reshape who was understood as “terrorist” by applying the label to left political movements. As Alexander notes, cultural concepts such as democracy and freedom are often treated as fixed rather than “transitory elements of consciousness and society” (2013, p. 3). Within this framing, Argentine dependency, U.S. authority, and the bilateral relationship appear naturalized, so that challenges to them are cast as threats. Violence is thus framed as restoring “normalcy,” while resistance is criminalized; Argentina becomes a site where the “other” is disciplined in the name of freedom.

Violence extended beyond rhetoric, though rhetoric signals underlying assumptions. Labeling an Argentinian as a “terrorist” in an intelligence document positions them as a legitimate target of force. A memorandum to the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence opens with a brief acknowledgement that steps could be taken to limit human rights violations in Operation Condor (Warren, 1976, p. 1). Yet it quickly shifts to evaluating “the possible adverse political ramifications for the Agency should ‘Condor’ engage in assassinations and other flagrant violations of human rights” (Warren, 1976, p. 1). This framing suggests an expectation that violence would occur, with concern focused on its political consequences. Other documents indicate that U.S. intelligence networks were involved in monitoring Condor’s activities. If the U.S. had only recently learned of Condor, as one memo suggests, political caution alone does not fully explain the level of internal discussion around information management. The identification and coordination of “subversives,” at times involving U.S. intelligence, points to an intersection of geopolitical strategy and hierarchical control.

A memorandum on *Comments on Operation Condor*, circulated to multiple U.S. agencies, further indicates coordination. The document notes that “the principal item on the agenda was the discussion and planning of coordinated psychological warfare operations directed at leftists and radical groups” (1977, p. 2). It adds that “the exchange of information on subversives and terrorists was being conducted mostly bilaterally” (1977, p. 3), indicating ongoing collaboration. This suggests that the designation of the “other” as subversive or terrorist was closely tied to the application of force as a tool of governance.

Terrorism Review (16 February 1984) reflects a similar orientation, stating that countries such as Argentina were “quiet now, thanks to the sweeping and brutal government crackdowns on leftist extremism” (1984, p. 4). Here, repression is presented as effective, while human rights violations receive little attention. This language frames violence as a practical response to political opposition and reinforces a broader pattern in which state repression is treated as stabilizing within U.S. intelligence discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

Six years before the official beginning of the Argentine Dictatorship, President Nixon described America’s historic greatness as its willingness to “see what had to be done, and then to do it” (Nixon, 1970, p. 203). In many ways, the U.S. appears to have acted accordingly in Argentina to maintain political, social, and economic alignment. Across the declassified documents, U.S. intelligence discourse often frames Argentina as an enemy, the labor movement as “subversive,” and resistance as “terrorism.” Efforts to exercise sovereignty or pursue freedom outside U.S. foreign policy interests are frequently characterized as threats. In this way, genocide and state terror are presented as instruments within a broader vision of global democracy—one shaped by U.S. priorities and supported by existing power structures.

Through the analysis of declassified U.S. intelligence documents, four main themes emerge: the classification of the political left as subversive and terrorist enemies; an emphasis on economic dominance; concern over the publicization of human rights violations; and generally permissive attitudes toward violence. These patterns suggest a close relationship between colonial and patriarchal power in U.S.–Argentina relations. Supported by DFT, U.S. involvement can be read as aligning with foreign policy interests shaped by colonial history and patriarchal logics. The classification of individuals as “subversive” places them in a lower power position, while Argentina is often depicted as dependent on U.S. support. The U.S. contributed to shaping an Argentine government reliant on external resources, which in turn limited its ability to challenge these dynamics. Analyzing the declassified documents provides insight into how these structures operate within U.S. foreign policy.

The democratic structure of the U.S. is often described as promoting freedom through military intervention (Ruby and Gibler 2010, 340), yet the documents point to tensions in how this is realized in practice. Using the declassified materials to “question [the] purpose of violence and what mechanisms of violence were used” (Esparza, 2011, p. 1), the analysis suggests that U.S. intelligence institutions played a role in shaping the conditions surrounding the Argentine Dictatorship through military, economic, and ideological involvement. These conditions contributed to an environment conducive to neoliberal expansion, with long-term effects on Argentina’s economic position (Féron and Väyrynen 2024, 94; Hauskrecht 2025).

Contemporary U.S.–Argentina relations remain mostly positive, supported in part by “declassification diplomacy,” or the use of retrospective transparency to build goodwill (DeYoung 2016). A “loose coalition of grassroots organizers, lobbyists in Washington, and sympathetic members of Congress” advocated for changes in the relationship between the U.S. and the Argentine regime (Schmidli 2013, 2; Rise 1993), while

recent trade agreements have further strengthened ties (Leach 2026). At the same time, economic strain and lingering distrust continue to shape the relationship. While the labeling of Argentina as “terrorist” has receded, similar language persists in other geopolitical contexts. Economic intervention, particularly through IMF lending—where the United States holds significant influence (IMF, n.d.; “The International Monetary Fund,” 2022)—continues to affect Argentina’s policy landscape. Reforms tied to these loans, including privatization and deregulation, have had uneven outcomes, including inflation and social strain (Watts 2024, 284). U.S. interventionism in Argentina is no longer required because it has already shaped the dependency of Argentina.

Argentina was not the first nor the last case in which the U.S. applied a “dependent enemy” framework. Responses to political upheaval in the region varied (McPherson, 2011, p. 70) but often involved suspicion or intervention. Although less prominent in U.S. public memory than conflicts such as Vietnam or Korea, the Argentine case illustrates broader patterns of othering used in intelligence discourse. The patriarchal systems of power that seek to keep Argentina and other Latin American countries in subservient positions to the U.S. continue to be employed. The U.S. refuses to name violence in Palestine as a genocide (Sánchez 2025). Just as in Argentina, the genocide in Palestine is characterized by normalization of violence; political concern over human rights lacking tangible, parallel policy items; terrorist characterizations; and objectives for water and defence security for Israel over the right for Palestinian existence. “Palestinians simply cannot be innocent. They are innately guilty; potential ‘terrorists’ to be ‘neutralized’ or, at best, ‘human shields’ obliterated as ‘collateral damage’” for the expansion of Israel (Eghbariah). At the basis of both the 1976 Argentinian genocide and the 2023 Palestinian genocide are the basis of patriarchal colonial ideology: “civilized” nations going to other nations to conquer, control and bring to order the “terrorism” of the other (Sánchez 2025, 284).

What emerges from this analysis is not only the scale of violence, but also the extent of institutional tolerance surrounding it. The patriarchal systems that position Argentina and other Latin American countries in subordinate roles depend in part on how these characterizations are interpreted and enacted. This raises broader questions about how U.S. power is exercised and how other actors engage with it. Violence does not arise in a vacuum, nor does it occur in isolation; its effects extend beyond physical harm to include constraints on political and social life (Actis, 2006, p. xii). The patterns identified in the declassified documents also suggest parallels in how dissent and political opposition may be framed in other contexts, both historically and in the present.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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