

Spring 5-2011

Roots of Conflict: A Multi-level Analysis of the South Atlantic War of 1982

David E. Firester

The Graduate Center/City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_pubs

 Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Other Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Firester, David E. "Roots of Conflict: A Multi-Level Analysis of the South Atlantic War of 1982." City College of New York. May, 2011.

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the City College of New York at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Roots of Conflict: A Multi-level Analysis of the South Atlantic War of 1982

On 2 April 1982, the Argentinian military had invaded and occupied a series of islands known as the Islas Malvinas, or Falkland Islands.* Subsequently, The United Kingdom had responded with a counter-invasion and occupation in an effort to deny the Argentinian claim of sovereignty over the archipelago. After nearly two months and combat casualties in excess of a thousand soldiers the British military was able to negate the Argentinian success and assert its *own* sovereignty over the disputed territories. While the outcome of the dispute is clear, the impetus for its initiation is somewhat murky. This paper will attempt to highlight the various theoretical arguments that claim to explain the origin of the crisis. In order to accomplish this task, several levels of analysis will be explored. Such an approach will look at the individual, group, state, and systemic explanations of the conflict.

Historical Context: Sovereign Claims and Counter-claims

In order to discuss the Twentieth Century conflagration it is useful to understand the historically relevant background from which it was derived. Perhaps the genesis of the dispute could be said to have evolved out of an inter-imperialist struggle; that between Spain and Great Britain in the latter third of the Eighteenth Century. After a series of back-and-forth claims over the islands between the two imperial antagonists, the Spanish had

* The terms Falkland Islands (the British term) and Islas Malvinas (the Argentinian term) are hereinafter referenced in a combined fashion as the Falklands/Malvinas. The war itself will be referenced in a neutral fashion as the South Atlantic War.

eventually discontinued its South American imperial pursuits. From the end of Spanish rule in 1811 through 1829 no Spanish claims to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands had been made; however, the British claims persisted. From 1820 to 1829, the incipient Argentinian state (the United Provinces) had occupied the Falklands/Malvinas chain and at the end of the nine years had made a counter-claim to sovereignty (Freedman, 1982: 197).

Although the British had protested the Argentinian claim to the Falklands/Malvinas, the events of 1831-1833 between the United States and Argentina had provided an opportunity for clarification. The mission of the frigate *Heroína*, commanded by Colonel Daniel Jewitt, was to assert Argentinian sovereignty over the Falklands/Malvinas. His mission proved impossible, as his claims to jurisdiction were viewed to be lacking authority by the many foreigners (mostly Americans) who had been engaged in the commerce of sealing and whaling on the islands. Following Jewitt's misadventure, Argentinian "sovereignty" was passed in part to one Louis Vernet (a German-born naturalized Argentinian citizen) in 1828. By 1829, Vernet was able to secure the title of "commandant of the territory" and subsequently made it known that all further commerce would not be permitted in the area (Klafter, 1984: 399). The U.S. government had taken notice, but not action.

During the period 1830-31 Vernet and his cohort, Matthew Brisbane, had captured three U.S. vessels: *The Harriet*, *The Superior*, and *The Breakwater*. The local American Consul to the government of Buenos Aires, George W. Slacum, had passionately protested such actions, as well as the imprisonment of the American captains and crews. The protestation on behalf of the American citizens was granted a deaf audience with the Argentinians, who were unmoved and uninterested; even though the Americans were

interned within the boundaries of Argentina proper. Additionally, the assertion of Argentinian sovereignty over the island was at minimum tacitly conveyed to the Consul, and consequently to the United States (Klafter, 1984: 401- 411).

Following Argentina's contention that the episode was a private –rather than a diplomatic –affair, American President Andrew Jackson had decidedly committed to resolving the matter through “gunboat diplomacy” (Klafter, 1984: 412). Eventually, the piratical pair –Vernet and Brisbane –were ousted and then imprisoned by the American war sloop, *The Lexington*, and her crew of Marines. The Falkland islands were evacuated of most criminal elements (Vernet and Brisbane had commanded a small force of prisoners from Buenos Aires) and the status of the island chain was declared by America to be open for business. Diplomatic relations between Argentina and the U.S. were then severed from 1832 until 1847. In the meantime, the British had returned to fill the power vacuum on the Falklands/Malvinas. The American response was silence.

The key lesson of the episode lies in the Argentine position and concomitant logic. According to Klafter, the new leader at the time, Juan Manuel de Rosas, had viewed the political turmoil of the time to be the result of “foreign intervention” (1984: 416). This assertion must be weighed against the backdrop of the various wars that the nascent Argentine Republic was either actively fighting or concluding at the time. It seems plausible that in order to consolidate domestic power through pronouncements that resonated with the public, Rosas may have needed to play on the fears of the public in an effort to gain solidarity. Perhaps his calculus had included standing up to a superior foreign naval power (the U.S.) at the expense of losing any potential military confrontation, with a view toward the prospective benefit of domestic support. Therefore, one could tentatively say that

Argentina's actions in the period 1831-1833 may be explained by the individual level of analysis.

*The 1982 South Atlantic War***

For decades preceding the 1982 South Atlantic War, Great Britain and Argentina had been engaged in talks mediated by both the United Nations and the United States concerning the status of the Falklands/Malvinas. A mutual agreement regarding sovereignty was never fully achieved. On 19 March 1982, several Argentine scrap merchants had arrived on South Georgia Island (a dependency of the Falklands/Malvinas that lay approximately 1400 miles east of Argentina) on a private commercial expedition, without the consultation of the British government (whose South Atlantic claims extended to the island). The men had triggered British ire when they raised the Argentine flag on the island.

Following the escalatory event and consequent British condemnation, the British ship *Endurance* had departed the Falklands/Malvinas with its destination being South Georgia Island. Two days later, an Argentine naval fleet set sail for the Falklands/Malvinas. The crisis had entered a new phase; the potential for armed conflict was now more palpable.

The Argentine invasion had experienced no opposition upon landing on the islands. During the course of the following weeks both parties sought a peaceful resolution, while simultaneously ratcheting up the force behind their diplomacy: the machines of war. As American shuttle diplomacy, UN mediation, and even Papal consultation were proving ineffective, the British had recaptured South Georgia Island on 25 April, as a Task Force

** All statements of fact regarding dates, places, public pronouncements and events are drawn from both newspaper reports of the time and from the literary sources indicated in the "works cited" section at the conclusion of this paper. If a "fact" was in dispute amongst the sources it will be noted; however, if not noted the assumption should be that there is general factual consensus.

headed for the Falklands/Malvinas. By 29 April, the British had initiated a naval blockade around the disputed islands. On 1 May, the British invasion was initiated. Numerous naval battles had caused ships of both belligerents to be sunk (along with the attendant death and injuries that are naturally unavoidable). By 14 June, combat operations ceased and the British had reigned victorious over the Argentinians.

Why War?

At first glance it would appear that war was brought on by grave miscalculations and failed diplomacy, and had concluded as a result of an overall mismatch between military forces. This would not only be an oversimplified assessment, but a misguided approach to understanding *why* war had been chosen as a means to settle a dispute. In order to analyze the causes of war it is necessary to summarize a few competing theories that seek to explain its origins. At the same time this endeavor will include the placement of the arguments within the context of the levels of analysis that this paper intends to compare and assess.

Diversionsary War

Amy Oakes (2006) has posited that the South Atlantic War was a result of the Argentinian leadership's desire to divert attention away from the domestic unrest that was teeming at the time. While she is not alone in her claim, her reasoning is unique in that she uses what she calls an "alternative policies approach" in explaining the decision-making process leading to war. Though the Argentine economy was spiraling toward collapse, demands for more political freedoms were being made publicly and ferociously, and protests regarding the disappearance of thousands of citizens were becoming more prominent, the Argentine leadership did not select a diversionary war as its primary optimal solution.

Rather, as Oakes contends, the Galtieri government had been *compelled* to choose from among three policy responses to domestic unrest: (1) economic and/or political reform, (2) repression, (3) diversionary war.

Of the three policy options before Argentina, Oakes claims that though either of the first two were preferable, they were not practicable. The reason she gives is that the state's extractive capacity was declining steadily. That is, "The junta's inability to extract resources hindered its capacity to respond to the unrest: it could not adopt costly measures, such as meaningful economic reforms, sustained repression, or a full-scale war" (Oakes, 452). The option for "full-scale war" is a reference to the idea that the British were believed not to be committed to going to war over the Falklands/Malvinas. Therefore, the idea of a limited campaign with little British opposition seemed most probable in producing the desired territorial gain with minimal or no costs to bear. At least, insofar as Oakes asserts, the costs would be less than those of repression of the opposition, or economic reform.

The perception that the U.K. would not dedicate its military resources in the necessary quantity and quality to expel the Argentinians stemmed from a few assumptions. First, the British ship *HMS Endurance* that was docked in the Falklands/Malvinas was slated for removal and retirement as announced by the U.K. in 1981. The departure of the *HMS Endurance* would have signaled that had the British desired to maintain an armed presence in the South Atlantic they would not be withdrawing the last remaining implement of force. Jack Levy considers this matter to be rather central in understanding the role of misperceiving one's adversary's intent:

The British announcement of the withdrawal of the *HMS Endurance* from the South Atlantic in 1981 provides an example [of a deterrence-undermining display of weakness or lack of commitment]. The decision can be explained by budgetary constraints, factored problems,

and the outcome of a bureaucratic struggle between the Defense Minister and Foreign Secretary. It was perceived by the Argentines as a deliberate strategic decision and interpreted as an indication of British unwillingness to use force to defend the Falklands/Malvinas. This was a critical misperception contributing to the outbreak of war (Levy, 1986: 214; fn. 41).

Oakes claims the same causal logic (2006: 455- 457), as did much of the press at the time. The other assumptions that appeared to have been active at the time imply misperceptions, yet they stem from systemic, dyadic and state level forces. First, from the standpoint of the geopolitics, the Reagan administration had appeared more supportive of the Argentine junta as a result of their elimination of communist subversives during their “dirty war” (President Carter had enforced an arms embargo as a result of the human rights violations associated with the very same “dirty war”). Secondly, that the U.K. did not signal strongly their intent to use force to retain the Falklands/Malvinas was perhaps not very helpful in deescalating the potential for armed conflict. Thirdly, as attempts at economic reforms by the Galtieri regime had already failed and as the repression efforts at silencing the opponents of military rule became more anger-producing and less affordable the *available* policy options were increasingly constraining (2006: 456- 460).

One more consideration, and one that could be categorized as an *accurate* perception was that of culture. The manner in which the Falklands/Malvinas dispute was taught to Argentine schoolchildren had the intended effect of etching the matter into the psyche of Argentine identity. This would play into the regime’s hand, as protests after the invasion were less about the long list of grievances and more about being supportive of the government’s seizure of the Falklands/Malvinas. Even political opponents and labor activists

were cheering the government instead of engaging in the standard oppositional issuance of complaints (Oakes, 2006: 460).

In essence, Amy Oakes argues that the menu of policy alternatives before the Argentine military junta were all less than attractive in terms of a risk-benefit calculus. However, when faced with an untenable situation the need to find a rallying point for the citizenry to gather around had induced the regime to consider an external objective. Ultimately, the foreign military misadventure had only proven to be catastrophic.

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, it is implied that many levels of analysis may tend to explain *some* aspect of causality. However, if one were to consider the totality of argumentation that Oakes presents it would likely produce the following assessment: the state level of analysis is most explicative in that the misperception of the enemy's course of action would necessarily have to have been shared among the junta (read: group). This assessment is further bolstered by the assertion that the menu for policy choice existed as a response to the state's inability to resolve domestic matters of contention. The systemic level of analysis only serves to reinforce that of the state-level explanation in that its explanatory power is halted when considering the possible outcome of a full-scale war, absent the assumption that the British would acquiesce.

While diversionary war theory seems to have some explanatory power, Mitchell and Prins (2004) issue the caveat that in a dyadic relationship where an enduring rivalry between a democratic and nondemocratic set of adversaries are experiencing domestic economic difficulties the nondemocratic state is more likely to opt for a diversionary war. They base their research on a quantitative analysis, along with the explanation that the

politically transparent nature of the democratic state does not allow for seizing the opportunity to divert. In a nondemocratic state, the same opportunity appears to be easier to take advantage of.

An Alternative Explanation

The foregoing was an analysis of one scholar's assessment. In the interest of the social science process, it will now be exposed to an alternative line of argument. John Arquilla and Maria Moyano Rasmussen (2001) present a strong case for debunking what are perhaps the two most prominent explanations for the South Atlantic War of 1982. First, they argue that the diversionary war theory is not as applicable as it may appear. Second, they argue that the mutual misperceptions between the belligerent parties that led to an *unwanted* war is also problematic. Instead, they claim that the reigning junta had been able to take advantage of the fear that it instilled in the population during the "dirty war", initiated in 1976. The fearful conditions had resulted in the "demobilisation of civil society", which in turn allowed the junta to rule, absent any popular support (Arquilla and Rasmussen, 2001: 739-748).

Arquilla and Rasmussen attack the prevailing causal arguments one by one. First, regarding misperceptions, they contend that, "the junta had almost an entire month, between the invasion and the onset of active operations, in which to correct its misperceptions about American and British behavior" (2001: 752). Further, during that time frame both the U.S. and the Soviets had made it unmistakably clear that the British were "deadly serious" regarding their intentions to commit to war (753-55).

The next point that Arquilla and Rasmussen make is couched in the language of “structural-level factors” (754); however, their presentation seems to be more dyadic. They maintain that British global power was waning relative to that of their Argentinian rivals. What is more, the relative Argentinian gains were not merely the result of British decline, but of a burgeoning Argentinian defense budget. Thus, the relative shift in power parity gave some hope to the Argentine military that they might be poised to achieve victory in battle.

Another claim that the authors make stems from an organizational standpoint. They assert that the “organisational pathology of the Argentine military” had caused the junta to “misperceive itself” (741). This argument holds that the junta’s “true ‘constituency’” was the military services (741, 768). This was an outgrowth of the nondemocratic nature of the military not being subordinate to civilian masters. As well, the military inter-service competition had enabled dysfunction. This consequently rendered any military tactical advantages impotent vis-à-vis their English counterparts (759- 760).

Two general points seem to arise from the Arquilla-Rasmussen argument. For the sake of clarity they should be separated and explained on theoretical grounds. First, that organizations in general and militaries in particular are concerned with their own organizational survival (760) and will pursue organizational interests even to the detriment of their original rationale for existence is not new (Firester, 2011: 57, 72). Secondly, that a “cult of the offensive” mentality may guide first-strike proclivities, in this case a land grab, is a well-documented phenomenon (Van Evera, 1984). The point that the authors make is that the initial assault on the Falklands/Malvinas was perpetrated by the military services, but then each military service was noncommittal with regard to their best military elements. That is, an offensive cult first advanced and later undermined by parochial inclinations to

protect one's own elite service components is what Arquilla-Rasmussen contend had happened (2001: 763). Witness:

This more nuanced theory of organisations may provide the clues necessary to solving the puzzle of why Argentina's military first agitated for war and then, when conflict appeared imminent, opted to fight while withholding their key assets safe from harm. The crucial issues for the Argentine services revolve around why the army failed to send its mountain division to the Falklands, the air force based from the mainland rather than from the islands, and the navy refused to fight. All this occurred at the same time that the junta's military 'constituency' was preventing a negotiated settlement of the 1982 crisis.

And further that,

... this article adds the notion that the invasion was actually a case of preemption, in that the 'grab' of the Falklands in April, at a suboptimal time of year, occurred due to fears of the deployment of a British naval blocking force. (Arquilla and Rasmussen, 2001: 760).

In sum, the above proposition declares a systemic analysis (though largely dyadic in nature) to be applicable. This is further supported by a subordinate analytical observation at the group level: unchecked organizational pursuits that ultimately undercut the Argentine junta's ability to either backtrack or peacefully withdraw from the preemptive invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas. The essential claim that Arquilla and Rasmussen make is that a political decision for a diversionary war is not a sufficient explanation for the Argentine decision to exercise its military dominion over the disputed archipelago. Further, they downplay the influence of any mutual misperceptions in the period between the initial invasion and the full-scale war itself.

Other Considerations

The explanatory power of the Arquilla-Rasmussen analysis appears to be somewhat superior to that of Amy Oakes. Still, there are other factors that could be considered to be

minimally revealing of the *British* pre-war mindset. First, in hindsight there were signs indicating the degree to which the Falklands/Malvinas were judged worthy of defending that reflect British thinking. According to John Keegan (2003), as the British Task Force was gearing up for a counter-invasion (Operation Corporate) the maps upon which they had to rely were “from 1939 or had been photocopied from *The Times Atlas*” (311). This fact implies two possible images of the enemy: the territory was of little significance to the British Crown, and the probability of an Argentine invasion was highly unlikely.

Secondly, there was very poor intelligence on Argentine capabilities and equipment. The number of French-made Super Etendard aircraft was believed to be one, when it was in fact five (2003: 306). This was an important oversight, as the aircraft’s Exocet missile posed what would prove to be of lethal significance to the British fleet. The British also misjudged the effective range of the Super Etendard. This suggests the likelihood that the U.K. had believed that diplomacy would prevail and that a comprehensive understanding of the adversary’s full range of capabilities and equipment was less than necessary to obtain.

Conclusion

Although there may have been opportunities for each side to have backed down, they were missed. The preceding analyses seem to grant the presence or absence of mutual misperceptions as being related to the capacity to wage and successfully conclude war. The essence of such assumptions are rooted in the assessment of enemy capabilities. What is more difficult to ascertain –and more susceptible to misperception –is enemy intentions. According to Hipel (et al), one of the most prominent misunderstandings of the Argentine intentions beginning in 1982 was the British discounting of bellicose warnings as a result of

similar persistent threats (1988: 344). This phenomenon is recognized elsewhere as “alert fatigue.” In other words, even if Argentina had attempted to signal its resolve to resort to war, the U.K. may have become numb to previously comparable gestures.

The overall conclusion of this paper is inclined to believe that the 1982 South Atlantic War was accidental. The reason is that given either set of arguments explored here they would each indicate that war could have been averted, but for dissimilar reasons it was not. In terms of gauging whether the cause of the conflict was the result of individual, group, state, or systemic dynamics it is probably safe to assess that each had mattered. In the final analysis, however, it was perhaps the junta’s group-oriented influence that was most salient in the pursuit of staving off domestic threats to its regime survival.

Works Cited

- Arquilla, John, and Maria Moyaho Rasmussen. "The Origins of the South Atlantic War." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33, no. 4 (November 2001): 739-775.
- Firester, David E. "Failure to Adapt: Intelligence Failure and Military Failure as Functions of Strategic Failure?" *Master's Thesis; the City College of New York*, June 2011: 1-96.
- Hipel, Keith W., Muhong Wang, and Niall M. Fraser. "Hypergame Analysis of the Falkland/Malvinas Conflict." *International Studies Quarterly* 32 (1988): 335-358.
- Keegan, John. *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- Klafter, Craig Evan. "United States Involvement in the Falkland Islands Crisis of 1831-1833." *Journal of the Early Republic* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1884): 395-420.
- Levy, Jack S. "Organizational Routines and the Causes of War." *International Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (June 1986): 193-222.
- Mitchell, Sara McLaughlin, and Brandon C. Prins. "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (December 2004): 937-961.
- Oakes, Amy. "Diversionary War and Argentina's Invasion of the Falkland Islands." *Security Studies* 15, no. 3, July-September 2006: 431-463.
- Van Evera, Stephen. "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War." *International Security* 9 (1984): 58-107.