

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE E-19NEW YORK TIMES  
18 September 1983

WASHINGTON — The Argentines may be busily building themselves an atomic bomb. With such a weapon, Argentina would be able to deal with Great Britain on the Falkland Islands as a nuclear equal, as well as menace Chile in the dispute over islands at the tip of South America.

According to one U.S. intelligence analysis, a secret plan afoot in Buenos Aires is to divert a ton of uranium from one of Argentina's atomic energy plants to make enough plutonium for a bomb, with no international inspection agency the wiser. This analysis, circulated widely in our Government since May, evaluates the supposed plan with a curt "can be done. Plant has a 150-ton annual capacity. One ton could be done by bookkeeping error."

State Department officials dispute this interpretation, and other intelligence analysts argue that no credible evidence has come our way to suggest that the Argentine nuclear program — by far the most extensive in Latin America — has been diverting nuclear fuel to produce a bomb.

That brouhaha among spooks may be academic; as Philip Boffey of The New York Times reports, Argentina mines its own uranium and is building a plant that could turn out bomb material with nobody the wiser.

Here comes the controversy: Since Argentina refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, should the United States help that nation develop its nuclear potential by selling it heavy water and computers?

## ESSAY

## Atoms for Argies

By William Safire

That question is slanted to elicit a no. But the Reagan Administration argues that our previous policy of refusing to cooperate on anything nuclear with non-signing countries did not stop their development, and left us with no connective tissue. That is why, in the dead of night, with a two-paragraph announcement in the Federal Register, the U.S. recently slipped Buenos Aires 143 tons of heavy water; now the Argies will at least talk to us about safeguards. Isn't some progress, and contact that might lead to more, better than a sterile all-or-nothing posture?

That is the way the Reagan men slant the question to elicit a yes, but the answer is still no. Old détenteniks still hope that trade and aid to foes and friends will somehow make them dependent or grateful; that naïve approach does not work. The way to discourage any nation not now a member of the nuclear club from building a bomb is to bring our diplomatic, intelligence and economic pressure to bear to stop it.

The temptation to a proud people, recently humiliated in war, to convert atomic facilities to bomb production is obvious. Argentines, with inflation approaching 500 percent, are flirting with bankruptcy. With abundant coal and hydroelectric energy resources, billions spent on atomic development are misdirected. They need our economic help; we should link that help to their willingness to join the nations willing to submit to close inspection of all atomic facilities.

Blackmail? You bet. Is it unfair for the nuclear nations to insist that other nations stay out of their club? Yes. But the need to stop the spread of nuclear weapons into more hands overrides all equity.

Argentina is now preparing for democratic elections next month, which will be the military junta's Good Deed. Although the middle-class candidate is getting most of the international media buildup, keep your eye on Italo Luder, the Peronist candidate, who is in the pocket of the unions. When Peronists are allowed to run, they win; they pioneered the "third position" in international affairs; over half the trade in

Argentina today is with the Soviet Union. If Professor Luder wins, the U.S. will be holding out its nuclear carrots to a neutralist nation.

Fortunately, proliferation is one of those rare cases in which superpower interests are parallel. The U.S. should join with the U.S.S.R. in leaning against the pursuit of the bomb by the new government in Buenos Aires. Although we will be competing with the Russians for influence in Argentina, on that subject Moscow and Washington can agree to a superpower priority: Keep the nuclear club exclusive.

The same overriding concern should apply to our dealings with China, long a nuclear power, on matters atomic. Foggy Bottom has been smacking its lips at the prospect of selling Westinghouse reactors to Peking. But China is helping its ally, Pakistan, build the Islamic bomb, and we cannot count on Israel to non-proliferate the Pakis as they did the Iraqis. Before we agree to deal with China, the U.S. should require a promise of safeguards on all its atomic exports and bomb-making data to other nations, complete with international inspection of Chinese civilian nuclear facilities.

First things first. The spread of nuclear weapons to additional nations is the likeliest road to world war. The U.S. Government should make clear to Argentina and other allies that our help in atomic energy development is available only to countries willing to pledge to forgo the bomb.