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PROGRAM All Things Considered.... STATION WETA FM Radio
NPR Network

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SUBJECT Allegations of Chilean Support of Britain

SUSAN STAMBERG: NPR's Bill Buzenberg has been looking into American diplomatic involvement in the Falklands crisis, both before and after the Argentinian invasion two months ago. Buzenberg spoke with knowledgeable officials who refused to go on record.

BILL BUZENBERG: According to these sources, the British planned to bomb Argentine military airfields on the Latin American mainland two weeks ago. The air attacks would have coincided with British landings in San Carlos Bay on the Falklands. However, the United States vetoed that bombing plan. Secretary of State Haig was said to have hit the ceiling when he heard about it. The United States reportedly told the British Washington could not support such an escalation, basically because of the high cost to already damaged U. S.-Latin American relations.

In addition to the American reaction, there are also serious military reasons arguing against bombing mainland airfields. The cost to British bombers could be heavy. The runways would have to be recratered again and again to keep them inactive, and the Argentines presumably could move most of their operations to civilian airfields.

Nevertheless, the British appeared to have had plans to use air bases in neighboring Chile to carry out such raids. There were reports of British aircraft poised in Chile ready to strike.

At the time, according to the BBC, news accounts of

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British planes in Chile were prohibited by the British government under a provision of the Official Secrets Act relating to news injurious to the national interest. Chile has assisted the British in intelligence-gathering, and there have been confirmed reports about a British helicopter going down in southern Chile, possibly in connection with British commandos operating in southern Argentina.

It is not known if that activity was to coincide with British bombing raids on the mainland or was in lieu of such raids following the American veto.

Of course, the British have not bombed the mainland under explicit orders from the cabinet, and since their landing in San Carlos Bay, they have lost four ships to Argentine aircraft based on the mainland.

Diplomatic sources also say the United States warned Argentina at least two weeks before their April 2nd invasion of the Falklands that the British would have to react forcefully and the United States would have to side with the British. That account contradicts earlier reports that the United States either did not have timely knowledge of Argentine intentions to take over the islands or look the other way if it did know. According to these sources, the Argentines refused to believe the American warning. They thought the British might break relations and call for sanctions, but would not fight to re-take the islands. These sources say that in the two weeks prior to their invasion, Argentina was looking for overt British steps to defend the islands. No such steps were taken, despite Argentina's preparations, so the military government concluded that the British weren't going to react, and their invasion went forward.

Concerning the American switch from neutrality to the side of the British one month ago, these sources quote State Department officials as now recognizing that move was too abrupt and badly handled. Had the United States announced its new position without also saying it would provide American materiel support for Great Britain, it could have prepared Latin American opinion better. There might not have been such a devastating effect on U. S.-Latin American relations.

I'm Bill Buzenberg in Washington.