

A Global Cowboy Plays It Cool

Por Hugh Sidey, Time Magazine, 17 de Mayo de 1982, Nueva York, Estados Unidos

The Falkland Islands crisis has become for Ronald Reagan an intense seminar on geopolitics and war, focusing questions of stunning clarity on almost every aspect of the exercise of world power. Reagan, derided a year ago by Leonid Brezhnev as a global cowboy, has emerged as the man who repeatedly cautioned his Government in secret meetings, "Don't shoot from the hip."

When the crisis began, the State Department recommended the immediate recall of the U.S. Ambassador to Buenos Aires and cancellation of all contracts between the nations. Reagan was bothered by such an instant and severe public tilt toward the British. He decided instead "to go down the middle." The President told his aides that he did not intend in reality to be neutral but wanted a "balanced" public posture. American sentiment was with Margaret Thatcher, and so was Reagan. More than once he picked up the phone to reassure the Prime Minister that he was mindful of the enduring mutual commitment.

Because Reagan did not want to overdramatize the situation, the White House security apparatus was purposely kept in normal gear. The daily routine was merely bent to handle extra calls and conferences with National Security Adviser William Clark and Secretary of State Alexander Haig.

Amidst all the uncertainties, Reagan read and approved nine top-secret strategic studies that are designed to shape American global considerations for the rest of the century. Last week the President signed the directives that grew out of the studies, which had been under way for months. The outlines will be made public soon. How these changes will affect this shifting world remains to be seen. But Reagan, right or wrong, has made important decisions, and this time they have been tempered and sharpened by events he could watch from the edges.

Early in the crisis, Reagan was confronted with requests to intensify contingency military planning. Instead, he declared it was a time for "heavy diplomacy," not making moves for war. The eager Haig was sent on his peace shuttle.

When Reagan was told late at night that the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano had gone down, his first question was about the loss of life. The casualties profoundly affected Reagan and in his view altered the chemistry of the crisis. He became increasingly distressed as the numbers mounted, since these deaths deepen distrust and hatred.

After his first phone call April 1 to President Leopoldo Galtieri, Reagan was perplexed by the Argentine's determination to put troops on the Falklands. Reagan found Galtieri's argument about lingering colonialism unconvincing. Nor could the President accept the British obsession with self-determination for the 1,800 residents of the islands. Reagan was tutored, at his request, on the deeper motivations and the historic perspectives of the two nations.

Although Reagan downplayed the drama, his appetite for information was strong. When the Sheffield was hit by the Argentines, Reagan wanted details on the French-made missile that struck the ship. He also wanted to know why the British had split up their fleet, thus leaving the destroyer exposed.

Until last week the President accepted the British theory that a show of force would drive Argentina into negotiations before there was significant loss of life. With the attack on the Sheffield and rising indignation against the U.S. throughout Latin America, Reagan conceded that this idea had been a miscalculation. Some of the President's advisers concluded that perhaps they had abandoned evenhandedness a bit too dramatically, even though Reagan's luck seemed to be holding. A reminder for next time: more finesse.