

281. Memorandum From Vice President Bush to President Reagan¹

Washington, May 21, 1982

SUBJECT

South Atlantic Crisis: U.S. Posture

Following last night's collapse of the Pérez de Cuéllar mediation effort,² the events we have been forecasting for the past few days have begun to unfold. British forces launched a series of low-level commando probes on the Falklands under cover of darkness early this morning, accompanied by naval bombardment and tactical air attack. As weather conditions further improve in the area, we can anticipate significant escalation and the strong probability of British landings in much greater strength (1000 British troops have already been inserted according to press reports).

In the meantime, the inter-agency follow-up to the SSG³ which I chaired yesterday has examined four related areas of the crisis where coordinated U.S. action is now or soon will be required (public affairs, UN, Congress, response to UK requests for additional support). Al

¹ Source: Reagan Library, Executive Secretariat, NSC Country File, Latin America/Central, Falklands War (05/20/1982–05/24/1982). Secret. Reagan initialed at the upper right-hand corner of the memorandum, indicating that he saw it. Another notation on the memorandum indicates that Reagan saw it.

² See footnote 2, Document 277.

³ See Document 279.

Haig's memo (Tab A) summarizes this work and suggests the posture we should take in each of the areas concerned.

George Bush

Tab A

Memorandum From Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan⁴

Washington, May 21, 1982

SUBJECT

US Posture Toward the Falkland Crisis

Now that military action on the islands has begun, we should take the following actions:

—Our *public* spokesmen should state that we have been concerned all along that failure to implement UN Security Council Resolution 502 would lead to intensified fighting, and that we are ready to help work toward a political solution. We should steer clear of any statement of concern about the British action itself, which they are taking in accordance with their right of self-defense.⁵

—In the *UN* we must be prepared to join the British, and probably one or two others, in voting against a cease-fire resolution. We will find it harder to vote against a resolution which provides for a cease-fire, withdrawal of all forces, and introduction of a UN force, though we must think carefully before abstaining on any resolution the British vote against.⁶

—We will want to keep *Congress* informed, and, if necessary, head off unhelpful resolutions (e.g., call for cease-fire only).

—We should continue to be responsive to *British requests* for materiel assistance, even in greater quantities drawing the line at impairing our own readiness, while not agreeing to operational participation, e.g., refueling or resupplying British ships or aircraft in the South Atlantic.

⁴ Secret; Sensitive.

⁵ That day, May 21, Speakes read a statement on the conflict in the Falklands at the White House daily press briefing. For the text, see *Public Papers: Reagan, 1982*, Book I, p. 662.

⁶ Reagan underlined this sentence and wrote in the left-hand margin: "AI—Wouldn't this (underlined) be hard to explain? RR."

If British action produces a quick surrender of Argentine forces on the Falklands,⁷ we—and no doubt the British—will want a cease-fire resolution passed by the Security Council. This could help avert an extended conflict. The Argentines—by then, probably a successor to Galtieri—*may* go along with a cease-fire. The key may be our ability to get assurances from the British that they will show magnanimity, by not, for example, reintroducing such symbols of British rule as the former governor and by committing themselves to resuming negotiations toward a political solution. We will want to approach the British with this idea early on if things go well for them militarily.

If it appears that the struggle for the islands will be long, with casualties growing and the outcome in doubt, we will want to consider a new negotiating initiative.⁸ We and the Brazilians could take the lead, working with the Secretary General. We should confer first with the British. They may well want a new initiative if they get bogged down and their support in Europe and at home is evaporating; but they may object to a new initiative as long as they think they have a reasonable chance of military success. We cannot decide now how best to pursue our interests in such a situation; but we can and will continuously refine our contingency plans.

The danger to Americans in Argentina will increase steeply with a British landing(s). We are therefore instructing our Ambassador to cut back, in an orderly way, to a skeletal staff with no dependents.

RECOMMENDATION:

That you approve the above plan of action.⁹

⁷ In telegram 11384 from London, May 21, the Embassy provided evaluations of what the British would do if they were successful in retaking the Islands and if they were not successful, concluding: "Either way, we expect Britain's future will have been skewed by the Falklands affair in ways that Britons can now only dimly grasp. As they grope for answers, Thatcher and her government will rely heavily on our counsel and our support. If hard pressed, Britain may at times expect more from us than we can deliver." (Reagan Library, Executive Secretariat, NSC Country File, Europe and Soviet Union, United Kingdom (04/01/1982-07/31/1982) (1)) In telegram 3236 from Buenos Aires, May 21, the Embassy reported: "Whether or not the Junta survives, it seems to us entirely possible that the Argentines will coalesce around the military in an attitude of defiance. The crisis could thus be considerably protracted." (Department of State, Central Foreign Policy File, D820267-0826)

⁸ In a May 21 memorandum to Haig, Enders outlined a negotiations scenario, which suggested the participation of U.S. military forces, along with forces from Brazil, in a joint peacekeeping force, in order to make negotiations "more attractive from the British point of view," as well as a number of suggestions that "would help the Argentines come to terms quickly." (Department of State, Executive Secretariat, S/S Special Handling Restrictions Memos 1979-1983, Lot 96D262, ES Sensitive May 19-24 1982)

⁹ Reagan initiated his approval of the recommendation. Below this, he wrote: "But note question on p.1. RR." (See footnote 6 above)