

159. Telegram From the Embassy in Bolivia to the Department of State¹

La Paz, September 10, 1980, 2133Z

7634. Subject: U.S. Policy Toward Bolivia.²

1. (S-Entire text.)

¹ Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800432-0250. Secret; Immediate; Exdis.

² A checklist prepared by the White House Situation Room, September 11, summarized this cable. Aaron forwarded the checklist item to Pastor on the same date and noted, "We need to formulate a position; suggest steps." In a memorandum to Tarnoff, September 12, Dodson asked the Department to chair an interagency group "to identify US options." (Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Country File, Box 5, Bolivia, 1/77-1/81)

2. Summary: Heartened by the continued international isolation of the Garcia Meza regime and indications of growing military and civilian disaffection, some opposition elements are becoming increasingly active in plotting against the regime. As a result, Embassy personnel have been contacted on numerous occasions by individuals seeking support, advice and, in particular, a reading on the type of successor government which the US would encourage and support. If we choose to do so, we might well decisively influence events here. In fact, in responding to these appeals, we have to take great care to avoid inadvertently giving the appearance of promoting anti-regime plotting. Despite our disapproval of this regime, the Embassy believes that we should not be involved in efforts to overthrow it. We believe that our present policy is appropriate and effective, and a Ore Interventionist Policy could produce undesirable results. However, since we are now being asked by Bolivians on an almost daily basis to do more, the Embassy would welcome a critical review of our response to these requests and also of our conclusion that any direct US Government support to or encouragement of anti-regime elements would be unwise. End summary.

3. Current situation: As our reporting has indicated, we believe that the Garcia Meza regime is becoming increasingly shaky. The principal factors contributing to the erosion of its power are: the regime's failure to establish its legitimacy or develop a coherent program of government, its continued systematic widespread violations of human rights, its links with cocaine traffickers, its dependence upon Argentina, chaos within the public sector created in part by arbitrary arrests of employees on the basis of unsubstantiated allegation, the confrontation with the Church, and its ineffectiveness in dealing with its international difficulties. In the latter category are its failures to solve the problem posed by Lydia Gueiler's presence,³ to neutralize international criticism over the continued detention of the Former Minister Fernando Salazar Paredes to counter charges of systematic human rights violations and involvement in narcotics trafficking, to deal with the approximately two hundred people harbored in embassies in La Paz, to deflect or dilute the continued vigorous criticism from Bolivia's Andean partners

³ Former President Lydia Gueiler was detained in the presidential residence immediately after the coup, and then in the papal nunciature in La Paz. In telegram 7154 from La Paz, August 22, the Embassy reported on Watson's August 21 meeting with Gueiler, in which she described negotiations with the regime and "stressed to Chargé that she remained determined not to accept any conditions on her departure." (National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800408-0335) She departed for Paris on October 4. (Telegram 8250 from La Paz, October 4; National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800474-0497)

and—most important—to persuade the Andeans, Europeans, Japanese and the US to establish normal diplomatic relations.

4. The apparent inability of the regime to handle these domestic and foreign issues is emboldening its opponents in spite of the continued repression and causing its supporters to question the regime's viability and their own association with it. This is evident in recent increased activity by supporters of Siles' clandestine government (more underground documents, minor explosions) and more indications of serious dissidence on the part of some influential military leaders. The regime retains valuable assets, however, particularly the loyalty to date of most major units, the support or at least acquiescence of important upper and middle class elements and Interior Minister Arce' quasi-independent paramilitary operatives.

5. It is by no means certain as yet that, despite the regime's failure, opposition to it will coalesce in such a way as to bring it down. The key in this regard, of course, is the Armed Forces. The current tendency seems to be increased dissolution which feeds on itself as each major actor maneuvers for advantage and discipline erodes. Thus far, however, most military dissidents seem to be acting independently; an organized, coherent opposition movement has not formed. Although powerful units in and around La Paz (such as the Tarapaca and Ingavi regiments) might by themselves be able to topple the regime, their leaders may be reluctant to move without support from other units. Fear within the military that the institution will be destroyed if it divides is a powerful agglutinate. Moreover, Garcia Meza may have succeeded in reinforcing military unity this week during a meeting he called of the commanders of all major military units.

6. In this context, although the positions of the Europeans, the Japanese, the Vatican and the Andeans are very significant, the regime perceives the US stance to be by far the most important to its survival. This is obvious from the regime's constant flailing at the US and particularly President Carter, its recent efforts to appear to be dealing with the narcotics trafficking issue we have raised, and the inquiries we receive from supporters and self-styled emissaries of the regime as to what must be done in order for the US to renew normal relations with Bolivia.⁴ The crucial nature of the US position is also evident from the solicitations we have received from the underground resistance movement, as well as from dissidents within the Armed Forces.

⁴ In telegram 6483 from La Paz, July 31, the Embassy reported on approaches from "high-ranking members of the Garcia Meza regime" to various mission personnel. (National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800367-0577)

7. Overtures: We have had no discussions with policy-level officials of the regime and have rejected overtures from them. Likewise, we have refused to treat with those who represent themselves as official emissaries of the regime. We have described our position, however, to supporters of the regime who have averred that they would like to meet with us on their own account and not as envoys of the regime. To reduce the chances of misunderstanding over the nature of these informal discussions, Charge has not participated in them. We have stressed in these conversations the substantive basis for the US position, noting particularly our concern about the interruption of the democratic process, the continuing widespread human rights violations and the links between the Garcia Meza regime and major cocaine traffickers. We have suggested strongly that, in order for any improvement in relations with the US to be possible, serious efforts to deal with these issues would have to be taken by whoever were in power in Bolivia. We have also pointed out that, Garcia Meza's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, the US is not promoting a counter coup or intervening in any way in Bolivian affairs. We are merely exercising our rights to determine the nature and style of our relations with other countries and to decide where our military, economic and narcotics-related assistance can be most effectively and productively used.

8. In our conversations with military dissidents, we have made essentially the same points. Our responses to their direct questions concerning whether or not the US would support a regime replacing Garcia Meza's and, if so, on what conditions have been noncommittal. We have stressed that we are concerned more about major substantive issues than personalities.

9. Embassy personnel have been approached repeatedly by people claiming (at least in some cases accurately, we believe) to represent Hernan Siles or elements of his UDP coalition. They have requested us to: hide them; furnish a clandestine base of operations; give them money; arms, vehicles, radio equipment; take more vigorous action to topple the Garcia Meza regime; provide advice; and most recently smuggle Siles out of the country. In response we have described in detail US actions since July 17 and stressed that the US position is firm and is most unlikely to change under present conditions. Thus far we have deflected successfully requests for asylum and other forms of direct assistance without exposing or alienating those who have approached us.

10. US policy: We believe that our policy toward Bolivia and its implementation have been just right and that we should maintain a steady course. Our position is clear and fully consistent with our overall global and hemispheric policies. While it seems to be having the desired effects within Bolivia, it has not alienated any of the other major foreign

actors with the exception of Argentina and even the Argentines are muting their anger. Garcia Meza's claim that our policy is interventionist is essentially groundless and we believe generally perceived as such. Our stance here also has the important advantage of reinforcing our positions in critical areas such as Central America, the other Andean countries and Brazil.

11. It is quite possible that an encouraging word from US to key military commanders could trigger a coup or Col. Gary Prado's term a "substitution" of the current military leadership. We believe, however, that such an effort by us would be parlous. The outcome of a coup would be far from certain. Whatever the outcome, we would be exposed to legitimate charges of interventionism. If the coup were successful, we might find ourselves wedded to a regime which, while perhaps an improvement over the present one, would still be somewhat out of sync with our overall policies in Bolivia and the hemisphere. We would have assumed a substantial obligation to whomever we had encouraged to seize the leadership of this bankrupt country. We might also find ourselves distanced from major civilian political elements. It would be one thing to acquiesce gracefully to a more moderate military regime which showed clear signs of taking positive action on the principal substantive issues of concern to us. It would be quite another to find ourselves committed to a regime whose behavior is highly unpredictable. We believe on balance therefore that, rather than taking any action here which might influence events more directly, we should continue our diplomatic pressure here and in other capitals, try to remain within a broad international consensus and keep our heads down in La Paz.

12. We suggest that the Department (together with us) begin to formulate contingency measures to be taken if the current regime should fall. We suggest, for instance, that our initial response to any military regime which supplants Garcia Meza's should be very cautious but should reemphasize our interest in effective action on human rights, narcotics and a return to democracy. Any statements should come from Washington, although the Embassy could be authorized to make inconspicuous demarches to appropriate officials to reinforce our positions. Any decisions to renew economic, narcotics or military assistance programs, we believe, should be delayed until we have a sound basis to believe such assistance would be effective as well as politically desirable.

13. We would welcome a critical review of our policy recommendations (both in current conditions and in the event there should be a change of regime) and of our responses to date to overtures from

various Bolivian political interests.⁵ Department may wish to pass this message to Deputy Assistant Secretary Eaton and Ambassador Weissman for their review.

Watson

⁵ For the NSC and Departmental response to this cable, see Documents 160 and 161.
