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Clayton S. Oppenhuizen
Bowling Green State University, coppenh@bgsu.edu

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**National Development and the Fight over Black Gold:
U.S. Perspectives on the Argentine Oil Industry 1946-1955**

Clayton S. Oppenhuizen

ABSTRACT

The paper summarizes the relationship between the U.S. and Argentina in the immediate post WWII period focusing on both nations aims in developing Argentina's oil industry. It is a comparison on the intension of negotiations between the two nations focusing on bargaining strategies and ultimate goals of what developing an industry can mean to multiple actors on an international stage.

U.S. Perspectives on the Argentine Oil Industry

Throughout the twentieth century oil has boosted manufacturing, increased trade and created wealth for many nations. Due to this it has been the greatest commodity driving industrial growth. This commodity from the period of 1943-1955 in Argentina played an essential role. It was in this time period that it would become one of the key supplies in an ongoing struggle between the influence of United States involvement in Argentine development and Argentina's goal of becoming economically self-sufficient. In seeking self-sufficiency President Juan Perón of Argentina implemented the tactic of the "Third Position". This concept was one that many non-alignment nations used both in WWII and in the Cold War. Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales (YPF) was the national oil company in Argentina at the time and was key in deliberations between Perón and United States ambassadors. Perón sought development but wanted to limit the role of external forces in his nation and the U.S. sought to implement policies that were the precursors to modernization theory that would come to dominate the later Cold War era in Latin America. This began an era where autonomous development was perceived as a threat to U.S. foreign policy and global hegemony.

The research I have conducted adds to the historical understanding of U.S.-Argentine relations of the era. This is especially important given the need for oil in a time when national development strategies and international relations systems experience dramatic shifts. Analyzing U.S. reactions to national development and Peronism adds a seldom-analyzed view of foreign relations history. My primary source materials for research are the Foreign Relations of the United States, hereafter referred to as FRUS documents collection. The series is organized by administration, topic and region. It is available in research libraries throughout the country (including Jerome Library on Bowling Green States campus). More recently, the volumes have been digitized and made available online by the University of Wisconsin and the Office of the Historian. These documents expose the intentions of U.S. diplomats in Argentina. They cover a myriad of topics focusing on the very general economic issues to specifics of what wells need to be developed in Argentina. The FRUS documents will be used to analyze diplomatic history as a main approach. In conjunction with the literature on Peronism, my reading gives context on the dynamics of macro theories and reactions two theoretical implementation by both the U.S. and Argentina. I argue that Perón's aims were to develop his nation toward eventual geopolitical independence but the U.S. sought to make them dependent so as to gain favor in the region and sway other leaders in Latin America away from developing the way Perón planned to develop Argentina.

The paper relies on diplomatic correspondence between U.S. ambassadors, embassy officers, U.S. secretaries of state, as well as Argentine officials and President Perón. The Office of the Historian regularly compiles an exhaustive (but not complete) list of declassified correspondence and reports and publishes them in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) collection.

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U.S. interests in Argentina

The geopolitical aims of the U.S. in Latin America during the early 1940s were fostered by the Good Neighbor policy. However this aim would change as the international climate shifted from WWII era into the Cold War. Positions arose and the binary shifted from Allied V. Axis to Capitalism V. Communism. In this era though there was the belief of the “Third Position” whose economic equivalent is autonomous national industrialization. This ideology excluded both the U.S. and USSR as it sought to develop without assistance of either. However, the U.S. sought to establish and maintain agreements and alliances through market based economics with these nations. The push by the U.S. to control geopolitics is emphasized through the tension between Juan Perón and ambassador Spruille Braden (Ambassador from 5/21-9/23/1945) during Perón’s campaign for the presidency (Table 1 displays ambassadors from 1939 to 1949)(Smith, 2008;Tulchin, 1990). In reaction to this Perón’s administration and workers unions adopted protectionist policies causing the U.S. to move diligently to become the central in leading countries to industrialize through markets as well as U.S. assistance (Dorn, 1999; Maxfield et al., 1990). However, Perón saw this as an opportunity to industrialize and a way of liberation from dependency on the U.S. and other global powers. The aims were admirable but much of the WWII ideals were weighing in the minds of U.S. policy makers and paired with the impending Cold War many viewed Perón’s aims as a direct and defiant threat to U.S. goals in the region (Vannucci, 1986).

Table 1: U.S. Ambassador's to Argentina: 1939-1949

U.S. Ambassadors to Argentina	Starting Date	Ending Date
Norman Armour	6/19/1939	6/29/1944
Spruille Braden	5/21/1945	9/23/1945
George S. Messersmith	5/23/1946	6/12/1947
James Bruce	8/21/1947	8/20/1949

Perón's protectionist philosophy manifested itself in the "Third Position" that encouraged other geopolitical actors to arise in competition with the U.S. and Soviet Union (Dorn 1999, 331-51). This protectionism, paired with U.S. market control aims completely eradicated the "Good Neighbor" policies established by Roosevelt and instead moved for power via soft aims (Lopez-Maya, 1995; Dorn 1999, 331-51; MacDonald 1980, 386-390). The key time period of the reinvention of U.S. policies was from 1946-1950; this was a turbulent time for Argentina and the U.S. alike that proved to be vital to negotiations and solidification of their relationship.

Peronism

Understanding the origin of Peronism is essential when analyzing U.S.-Argentine relations of Perón's first administration. The key factor is that unions negotiated with employers over conditions, wages and projects. The decisions made in negotiations applied to union and non-union workers alike. Similarly State-Unionized workers were accepting the same benefits. This is vital in understanding why workers pushed hard for YPF expropriation of wells and oilrigs from international corporations (James 1988, 7-40).

Other analysis aims to overturn the notion that Argentine labor was weak before Perón's rise to power. In addition it discusses the strength and relationship workers had with Perón during his first tenure in power. Highlighted by this is that subsidiary workers organizations and impotent industrial capitalists were the source of Perón's national populism (Adelman 1992, 243-59). Yet

another key factor is the importance of Perón's relationship with industrialists. Perón's emphasis on workers virtually nullified his relationship with industrialists in Argentina at the time. This is vital as Perón did seek out private corporate assistance for Argentina's oil issues later in his administration. Furthermore it would lead to Perón's eventual overthrow in 1955 because his policies supporting workers were antithetical to industrialists. (Horowitz 1990, 199-217). Further analysis addresses the junction between the government and labor in Argentina. The main analysis focusing on government involving labor through middle and working class people in their plans for stability (Little 1973, 644-62; Buchanan 1985, 61-95).

State autonomy was a vital part of Peronism that began with the 1943 coup. Autonomy was a reaction the U.S. and British pressures during the war effort. This theory is true even after as U.S. interests played a factor in shaping the Argentine oil industry (Waisman 1989, 159-74). In contrast to this various scholars discuss the domestic factors that created Peronism. A vital analysis is that of the mass movement as a massive mutual benefit society (MBS). In doing this and extending social security to more workers than ever, Perón generated a large debt and made MBS redundant (Munck 1998, 573-90). This illustrates the debt Perón generated that hurt his aims of development as well as the issues workers had with Peronism. Furthermore, sociological analysis of Peronism displayed Perón's secured cities, townships and the countryside in an effort to form solidarity (Smith 1972, 55-73). Seeing the roots of Perón's support based in cities makes it even more understandable why many manufacturing unions are at the forefront of his policymaking and not agrarian or unions based in the outside of cities. One thesis addresses how the changes that created Peronism came to be and what they meant to workers in Perón first administration. The three biggest factors were WWII creating deep divides between dominant

classes, the desire to continue the process of industrialization and finally the government's decision to expand social security and industrialization. Once Perón gave security and assurances to some workers more began to demand policies that assisted their industries or unions (Di Tella 1981, 33-56). YPF workers and higher officials did ask Perón to give contracts and assurances to them in order to develop both the petrol industry and YPF as a workers union. However, this came to be a divide between workers and Perón later in his administration.

U.S. & Argentine Oil Trade (1930s-1955)

Table 2: Argentine Oil Consumption Figures

Time Period	Production (gross)	Imports (gross)	Consumption (net)	Percentage imported
1935-9	2,740	1,780	4,120	22.8
1940-4	3,780	1,110	4,470	16.4
1945-9	3,630	3,400	6,340	48.3
1950-4	4,990	5,440	9,460	52.2
1955	5,000	7,560	11,450	60.2

Source: George Philip, *Oil and Politics in Latin America: Nationalist Movements and State Companies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 407.

From 1930-1943 there was a tremendous shift in Argentine production as well as consumption of oil. The biggest shift was a law in 1932 in which YPF was integrated as a government entity. This law allowed for greater political control of YPF but barred any and all expansion of private industry that did not support development of YPF. The latter segment of the law limited YPF's ability to expand as well (Philip 1982, 401-3). Peronism's shortcomings in the Argentine oil industry. Solberg effectively displays the assimilation of many workers unions into YPF, although they made better wages workers now needed approval to strike and were granted only what the government administration saw as fit (Solberg 1979, 156-83). Kaplan analyzes YPF from a leftist perspective, his analysis displays the fact that Perón's inability to fully nationalize or even defend the oil industry created conditions that required U.S. assistance. This was amplified since Europe was in shambles unable to financially or industrially assist Argentina (92-105).

Though oil was not a hot button issue during WWII in Argentine-U.S. relations it was relevant as early as 1942. In early December of 1942 YPF requested oil industry materials from U.S. companies, in particular Standard Oil. U.S. official Philip Clover negotiated with Sr. Villa (head of YPF) about the required materials. This negotiation failed, as the materials needed could not be provided because it was going to YPF production fields, very little would go to Standard Oil or Ultramar (Bohan 1943, 379-80). The U.S. was unwilling to give materials to a nationalized organization even before Perón's tenure in power. The U.S. even took to asking other Allied Nations and multinationals for details on petroleum dealings with Argentina. They were not part of a so called petrol block in the Western Hemisphere and the State Department were stern in telling corporations they should be weary of any oil ships under an Argentine flag (Hull, 1943, 381-2). The Argentine government began to receive tons of alloys and steels intended for YPF to

use on active oilrigs in late March. The importance of materials being transferred by the U.S. is that they were not going to be used on Standard Oil or Ultramar rigs. However, Hugh Millard at the embassy believed that given the estimates of oil being produced and steel coming in by the end of 1943 the U.S. owned oil companies would be able to receive materials from the Argentine government (Millard 1943, 382-3). On April 30th 1943 ambassador Armour contacted Secretary of State Hull about the contract from 1942 being upheld in principle. The contract stated that Argentina would still trade petroleum with other nations of the Western Hemisphere though they had no direct contract with the United States. The latter stipulation was essential as the U.S. was spread thin due to the war effort, but having the petroleum available to the U.S. and other nations in North and South America would only ease the tensions brought on by WWII (Armour 1943, 383-4).

The negotiations were for 36,000 metric tons of petroleum industrial equipment in a 12-month period, of which YPF would receive 24,000 tons. A U.S. government study found that Argentina was asking for 68 percent of total equipment intended for all of Latin America during the same time period. Armour cited that the new regime (after the 1943 coup) believed that the 1942 negotiations were all but finalized. This was utterly wrong, as the U.S. had no intentions of accepting the initial offer from the very beginning of negotiations (Hull 1943, 388-90). Armour reminded Hull that though the negotiated contract seemed rather obtuse by U.S. standards, it was rather fair. Citing the fact that other American republics entered the petroleum pool not because of ties to America but because they could not prosper more outside of the pool and that Argentina was giving 10% of its oil to the pool in a year where Argentina was operating at a 35 percent shortage. Armour finished his address stating,

Even though 36,000 tons of material over the next 12 months may be more than another South American country receives, Argentina's contribution to the petroleum pool is also greater. Moreover since April 1942, almost no petroleum industry material has been received here and therefore the quantity expected over 12 months may be compared with what other countries will have received over 27 months ending with June 1944 (1943, 390-2).

Armour's emphasis on this negotiation was strategic as the new government in Argentina was already lack stable negotiations with the U.S. government. Armour addressed this candidly in a telegram to Secretary of State Hull on June 26, 1943. Citing that the negotiations could have been taken off the table before the coup and it would not have affected U.S.-Argentine relations. Now that the new regime is in power the negotiations were heightened. Armour warns that any attempt to renegotiate should not be considered, but rather postpone any petroleum negotiations so as to avoid the issues had with this negotiation. The U.S. believed the tonnage to be negotiable when it was actually an already negotiated amount by Armour with YPF and members of Argentina's government. Argentina's petrol assistance to South America was based solely on acquiring the specified amount of industrial equipment (Armour 1943, 399-400). The negotiations were agreed upon however it was not what either nation desired.

The negotiations for equipment were annoying for both Argentine and U.S. officials. Argentina needed the equipment to develop the wells that YPF was using and need better means to transport and generate oil. The U.S. had no excess materials to spare from the war effort, nor were they willing to take what little they had to spare and give it to Argentina for the development of their nationalized oil industry. The U.S. was trapped simultaneously with the need of developing good relations with a strong Latin American country but also a lack of desire in dealing with a nation that was disengaged with the war effort.

From 1944-1946 oil was not a main factor in U.S.-Argentine relations. It wasn't until November 12, 1946 that oil discussions first began. Then ambassador George Messersmith sat down with president Perón to discuss Perón's emphasis on private investment in the development of his nation. In the days before Messersmith's meeting with Perón he met with the heads of Standard Oil Argentina and Ultramar, both company heads urging Messersmith to negotiate with Perón about acquisition of YPF wells and development of those wells (Messersmith 1946). The new administration in Argentina had appointed and dismissed chairmen at YPF multiple times in this period. The results were that no stable negotiations could be made and that YPF was lacking centralized and stabilized power in the new administration (Philip 1982, 401-14). This was fractured the solidarity of Peronism that was fostered earlier in Perón's administration.

1947: Cold War Tensions & Negotiations

In the early part of 1947 oil became a main discussion in the development of relations between the U.S. and Argentina. In Odell's work "Oil and State in Latin America" oil was seen as a main source to development of the Argentine manufacturing industry. In many nations it is the primary mode of seeking development. In Argentina especially it is important because it produces much of its oil for domestic use and there is still a need to boost production in order to propel toward modernization. The options for Argentina are private foreign investment or loans from large international agencies like the IMF or nations like the United States (Odell 1964, 659-73).

On March 26 1947 a telegram was sent from acting Secretary of State Acheson to the Argentine embassy about a *La Prensa* article addressing the abolition of mixed oil companies in Argentina and expropriations of mixed company property (Acheson 1947, 278-9). Acting ambassador to

Argentina George Messersmith wrote on the tensions of the Argentine government, YPF and U.S. oil companies in the region in May of 1947. Messersmith's first address regarded the government's demand, under President Perón, to increase wages for workers at Standard Oil sites before an increase in price of oil can be discussed. Standard Oil believed that if there were not to agree to wage increases their sites would be taken in what would be considered a national energy emergency. The workers began a slow-down strike at YPF and it spread to private U.S. companies in Argentina, this resulted in the U.S. companies closing operations due to the dangerous nature of operating with few employees. Messersmith warned the companies that the shutdown would create resentment publicly toward them due to the shortages it was causing but the companies wanted assurances of oil price increases by Perón's administration before increasing workers wages. An agreement was reached and the companies even supported a single union, which they believed to be detrimental to the oil industry. The Argentine government and U.S. interests brought the agreement to the workers but they refused to end the strikes citing that they needed more wage increases. This irritated U.S. representatives but they believed it must be settled between the Argentine Ministry of Labor and the workers. Messersmith refused to intervene (Messersmith 1947, 279-83).

In early June of 1947, when Messersmith was relieved of his duties, ambassador James Bruce was appointed to Argentina. In his first meeting president Perón remarked that there was no question of Argentina's friendship with the U.S. but to assume that ties between two countries are lasting is foolish and that things would be fine provided there was no "direct conflict of interests". Perón went on to emphasize that he believed in private enterprise but also thought utilities should be government owned. Perón also felt Argentina could produce ten times the

amount of oil, with the machinery and assistance from U.S. entities, by opening regions from Mendoza to Salta and Tierra Del Fuego to Neuquen (Ray 1947, 283-4).

Bruce received demands from Standard Oil to give to the economic minister, Señor Miranda, citing remedies to their oil shortage and discriminatory policies of Argentina since the 1930s. Since 1943 Argentina's oil industry saw a decline of 8% in production, both public and private. Standard Oil's strategy of development emphasized hands off approach by YPF toward private interests and creating a fifteen-year window where private industries would compete with YPF. The permanent idea being that Argentina shift to a private oil industry entirely, this also was addressed in their demands to Bruce. Bruce was asked by Standard Oil to get rid of all veto power YPF held, all import-export controls and the pricing systems Argentina uses that manipulated private earnings in the region (Stand Oil 1947, 285-6). Bruce did not directly comment on the summary by Standard Oil however he did address the points of price increases and expansion in cables to the U.S. secretary of state the following month. Bruce acknowledged the losses that Standard Oil suffered due to the lack of price increases, even bringing it to Perón's attention. Perón apologized stating that he had recently appointed a new Board of Directors to YPF and thus negotiations were slowed (Bruce 1947, 286-290).

Perón's Five Year Aims

The 1947 negotiations continued with tension as many private oil firms desired to maintain their properties and began believing expropriation was the intent of Perón and YPF all along. U.S. government representatives felt the fears of private companies were exaggerations of the truth. Perón believed that private industry could contribute but the U.S. government understood Argentine desires to nationalize the oil industry. The 1947 negotiations over U.S. interests

coordinating in development fell through and Argentina turned to her sister nation, Venezuela, and created a treaty in which they would supply Argentina oil needed in exchange for foodstuff.

This would sufficiently meet their five-year plan goals. As president Perón stated,

The Argentine oil policy must be based on the same principles on which all our economic policy is based: Maintenance of Argentine sovereignty over the wealth of our subsoil; rational and scientific exploitation by the State. When the State recovers immediate and direct command over the property belonging to the Nation, it must not relinquish the privilege of administering it, nor share functions that defend interests other than those of all Argentines (Bulletin 1947, 302-4).

Perón's stance was one of a man seeking to develop his own nation and one in which he believed that his third path could be a success. Nevertheless the U.S. was persistent in their stance of private enterprise's stabilizing effect, though it would assist the larger regional and global markets more than the Argentine people.

The issue of oil came down to a game of hardball negotiations between U.S. ambassadors, primarily Messersmith and Bruce, and president Perón. Perón wanted his oil industry developed and was open to private investment in order to do so, but he wanted that investment on his own terms. Messersmith and Bruce seemed willing to meet the most basic demands of workers striking initially and the basic needs of Argentine oil. However, they knew that even if Perón were to expropriate remaining mixed and foreign companies he had little to no capital to invest in the necessary materials to modernize the industry.

1948-1955: Continued issues

The years that followed (1948-55) were ones in which little change occurred in the oil industry. Perón integrated workers into the government coalition but even in this integration some sectors were ignored, YPF was one of these sectors. Perón called for 50 percent increase in production in his 1947 five-year plan. This strategy was meant to appease economic nationalists in Argentina

while also attempting to develop Argentina's industry. Perón's policies were hampered by domestic tangles of internal development with little capital to invest, but was also impacted by U.S. sanctions on heavy industry (Solberg 1979, 162-6). As displayed in Table 2 (on page 9) these sanctions by the U.S. on sending drilling and exploitation equipment created a "bottleneck" in the oil markets. Even Perón's reshuffling of YPF's board of directors in 1949, which created a noticeable increase in revenues, could not fully support YPF's aims during Perón's first administration. With this Perón turned to the U.S. and rebalanced the participation of private interests in the country in 1951 until he was taken out of power in 1955 (Philip 1982, 405-9).

In addition to these issues U.S. foreign policy shifted away to focus more on the arms and governmental issues of the region rather than petroleum discussions. In 1949 Argentina suffered a dollar shortage that dramatically effected the negotiations on all economic issues. YPF's refusal to sign a contract allowing direct importation of crude oil to Standard Oil and Ultramar, in order to refine it, created an economic strain on these American companies. These companies now had to get their crude through YPF. There were seven issues that the memorandum addressed in dealing with Standard Oil and Ultramar's troubles. This began with a 20 percent increase because of YPF's billing prices and a 10-15 percent surcharge for delivery and transportation. Transportation was another issue altogether, many of the deliveries were sporadic and when these American companies received crude oil it was often already partially refined. Finally workers slow-down strikes managed to control these companies' refineries by creating conditions where entire refineries had to shutdown for weeks at a time (Griffis 1949, 522-3). In 1950 a cable highlighting past discussions with Perón by Ambassador Griffis discussed the final situation of the petroleum debates. He focused on his final attempt to open negotiations however

Perón and YPF were unwilling and only sought to purchase Ultramar's refineries in Argentina. Ultramar had by then been affected by the slow-down strikes so much that they closed their business (Griffis 1950, 693-5). Ultimately the U.S. feared Perón's ability to stir public opinion and mass movement but was convinced that stability of his administration was fading as the dollar crisis grew in Argentina.

U.S. aims were tentative given the turbulent nature of Argentina in the immediate post-war period. The U.S. government was torn between an implementation of modernizing their trade partners while defending their own interests. The end result being that Argentina had to end negotiations with the U.S. and their companies, Standard Oil and Ultramar. Demanding too much from Argentina and believing the Argentine government was asking too much of them, Standard Oil ended up rejecting offers to oversee exploration of new wells and implementation of new machinery. The U.S. knew that Perón was a man of strong conviction, willing to do what he felt was best for his country. Perón's own position perplexed and irritated many U.S. officials. Perón would in private discuss the use of private enterprise to develop oil in the region. Publicly Perón would preach nationalization as a means of keeping capitalist U.S. interests at bay. In addition nationalizing industries helped bolster labor support for Perón. The issue that caused these negotiations to fail was the question: how to develop the Argentina's oil industry. This issue helped propel Perón's "Third Position" in negotiations and made compromised deals difficult for both parties. The Argentine government believed that utilities should be under their control, U.S. government ideals were that a mixed, if not mostly private, industry would benefit all and the private industries in Argentina were unwilling to give up their foothold on the market in such a lush untapped market. Furthermore the U.S. knew that an emphasis on free enterprise

would assist their companies and the regional oil market rather than the Argentine people. U.S. emphasis on laissez-faire economics did not accommodate the realities of Argentina after the collapse of liberalism.

Though Perón and Argentina attempted to solidify their position on the international stage it was ultimately not to be as U.S. pressures were too great along with internal turmoil from failing policies and a stratified society. However, it is seen that soft power, through the negotiations of Ambassador Bruce, was rather effective in shifting negotiations. This is an excellent example of U.S. concerns that mass movements not supporting their interests are perceived as threats. Thus situations were handled in a manner that sought to dampen if not eliminate perceived threats. In this instance the Cold War policy emerged that would continue as a dynamic of U.S. foreign policy to the present. The legacy that threats to our non-governmental institutions and our foreign policy ideology was born in this early Cold War period. These negotiations were exemplary of this ideology.

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