

5-19-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Gaudín, Andrés. "Argentine Ambassador Dismissed Over Lobbying U.S. for Armaments." (2017).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14518>

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## **Argentine Ambassador Dismissed Over Lobbying U.S. for Armaments**

by *Andrés Gaudín*

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: 2017-05-19

A leaked letter from the Argentine government to a US congressperson has revealed an ambitious military rearmament program aimed at “facing critical global threats” and a request for support for that program. Although, thanks to the complacency of major media empires, President Mauricio Macri quickly managed to mitigate the negative echoes of his request for help, the letter to the US Congress signed by Ambassador Martín Lousteau has resulted in the diplomat’s loss of accreditation, and in an investigation by the federal prosecutor.

### ***Request for US military equipment***

The letter was sent on June 16, 2016, to US Rep. Pete Visclosky, an Indiana Democrat and the ranking member of the strategic Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. In it, Lousteau reminded Visclosky of a meeting the congressperson held with two Argentine legislators the previous April. At the time, the legislators—without congressional authorization but speaking as if they were representing the will of the legislature in Buenos Aires—pointed out that Argentina needed “help from the United States to improve its capacity to deal with urgent global threats: combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime.” In the letter, Lousteau lobbied for the US Congress to include Argentina in the budget for US assistance to foreign operations. A month after the letter was sent, Congress approved a \$52 million budget item for military equipment earmarked for several countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Mexico, and Colombia, but not Argentina.

In his letter to Visclosky, Lousteau provided a list of equipment requested by the Argentine Army, Air Force, and Navy: 64 Bell, Cobra, Chinook, and Black Hawk helicopters; 182 Stryker tanks (five versions) equipped with 50-calibre machine guns, 105mm cannons, and Javelin missile launchers; 36 airplanes, including T-6 Texans, F-16 Fighting Falcons and Orions; and 24 armored amphibious fighters. Included in this list of powerful armaments that, according to specialists, are not apt for the tasks mentioned in the letter, is a request for TASER guns for the Cruz del Sur Peace Force, a little-known joint Argentine-Chilean project that is considered a platform for UN intervention. According to Argentina’s Ministry of Defense website, the Cruz del Sur Peace Force carried out joint operations last October about “negotiation, personnel registration, convoy escorts, and base operations, as well as an anti-riot action.”

### ***Letter leaked on cable TV***

As soon as the contents of the letter became public—leaked on a private cable television program—the opposition in the legislature called for hearings with Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra and Defense Minister Julio Martínez. They want Malcorra to reveal the contents of the complaints issued by neighboring countries, where the news was seen as the beginning of an arms race in the region. And they want to ask Martínez whether Argentina has any potential conflicts with bordering countries, which equipment would be used for border surveillance (all of Argentina’s borders are easy accessible land borders), and what terrorism the government plans to fight.

“This aspect is key, because we see that the government continues with its policy of criminalizing social protest, and our fear is that repression is on its way,” said Deputy Guillermo Carmona. “Those of us calling for the inquiry aren’t inventing anything. We simply refer to the statements of Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich when she announced that the government would repress demonstrations that block free transit, saying that ‘people who called for an iron fist should not mourn the consequences.’”

Hours after the letter was made public, Lousteau admitted that it had been a mistake for him to serve as intermediary for two legislators who were not acting on behalf of the full Congress, but Macri asked for his resignation nonetheless. In his defense, Lousteau explained that his goal had been to help Argentina “access programs such as the Excess Defense Articles,” by which the US makes available surplus equipment at symbolic prices to its allies and allows beneficiaries to use foreign military financing in the form of subsidies and soft credits. The program the ambassador cited allows the US Department of Defense, with the approval of the Department of State, to offer surplus equipment at a reduced cost, or at no cost, if it is determined that the equipment will be used to support the national security and foreign policy goals of the US.

### *Argentine ministers and deputies face charges*

The Federal Prosecutor’s Office (Fiscalía Federal) opened an investigation on Ministers Malcorra and Martínez and Deputies Eduardo Amadeo and Luciano Laspina, who were mentioned in the letter sent to Visclosky. Lousteau, however, will only have to appear as a witness. The Prosecutor’s Office alleges fraud, violation of official duties, abuse of authority, and acts prejudicial to the administration of public office. Amadeo and Laspina traveled to Washington in April 2016 and declared their trip before Congress but only said they were going as guests of the International Monetary Fund to attend its spring assembly. They will have to tell the prosecutor on whose behalf they spoke with a US congressman, and what reasons they offered to Lousteau in order to persuade him to carry out the controversial lobbying that led to his dismissal.

After having contributed troops to US intervention forces in Iraq in the so-called Desert Storm of August 1990, Argentina was recognized by the George H.W. Bush administration as an “extra-NATO ally,” something that opened the possibility of accessing certain benefits and programs. Nevertheless, in the nearly three decades since then, Argentina hasn’t received, nor asked for, special treatment from the Pentagon. This was not mentioned in Lousteau’s letter.

### *Limited repercussion*

Even though it cost an ambassador his job and resulted in the opening of a judicial case involving high officials, and even though it brought two ministers to the compromising position of a congressional inquiry, the controversy had little repercussion beyond a limited circle of experts. Rosendo Fraga, a specialist in defense matters, and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, a doctoral candidate in international relations at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., and a researcher at the private Universidad Di Tella in Buenos Aires called the Lousteau letter confusing and complicated, and Fraga added that it showed ignorance of military issues and that it was not written in good diplomatic form.

Lousteau is not a career diplomat; he went to Washington for the Macri administration as a political appointee.

According to Tokatlian, who estimates the total value of the requested equipment at US\$2 billion, "the letter is confusing and complicated for several reasons. It invokes the needs of the armed forces, although on a following line item, it places Argentine-US 'cooperation' in the context of the global fight against problems such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime that, in reality, are major security challenges." The expert said that "in the Argentine case, since the advent of democracy (following the dictatorship of 1976-1983) and in the United States through the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 (which established strict limits on the federal government's use of the military as a police force) there is a clear distinction of functions and attributions between defense and domestic security," something that Lousteau seems to ignore.

Tokatlian and Fraga agreed that the letter from Lousteau had a dual purpose: acquiring military equipment (e.g. the Texan training planes, of which 12 are already in Argentina) and obtaining armaments in the framework of programs dealing with transfers and surpluses offered by the Pentagon.

"More than a communication aimed at showing a certain willingness to invest in material to be used specifically for defense, it is about a request that announced Argentina's willingness to buy something, and at the same time, get donations. That would be understandable if it was from a small country or one without resources, but not if it is from a member of the G-20," the group of the 20 most powerful emerging industrialized countries, to which Argentina already belongs. Without specifying why, Tokatlian said that it seemed important to note that Visclosky is not an ordinary legislator. "He is a military businessman whose election campaign contributors include defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman and Defence Aerospace," said the scholar.

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