

# Media 'war' in Buenos Aires

The media specialist at the United States Embassy in Buenos Aires was engaged in a typical diplomatic exercise: Placing an opinion article from the newly arrived U.S. ambassador in the local media as a way to greet and thank the host country.

The messages are usually the same. They go something like: "I am enthusiastic about this assignment, love the country and am impressed by its people." In Argentina, though, nothing is typical. Amid what everyone calls a "guerra," or war, between media and the current administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the location of such a benign article is fraught with danger.

Give it to the outright opposition media – in this case the giant media conglomerate Clarín – and the government would likely read it as a political affront. Hand it to the pro-government end of the media spectrum and the U.S. might look like a lapdog.

In this case, the Embassy chose La Nación, a large newspaper that is critical of the current government, but strives to be an independent voice that openly looks to respected U.S. newspapers as a model.

There was another layer to the decision. The U.S. and Argentina are in their own extended period of diplomatic dysfunctionality. While not outright confrontation, such as between the U.S. and Venezuela, the relationship still is far from warm. For instance, newly appointed U.S. Ambassador Noah B. Mamet was not given a presidential reception. The newly arrived ambassador from China was. Point taken.

U.S. Embassy political staff openly call the relationship "difficult" and refer to President Kirchner's style as one of "confrontation." The Argentine government has made the gringos to the north a regular scapegoat for myriad problems. The

president went so far as to suggest last October that if someone were to do her harm, Argentines should look to the north – meaning Washington – for the likely culprit.

One local newspaper called it an “unprecedented escalation of tensions” between the two countries since 2003 when the Kirchners rose to power (Cristina’s husband Nestor was elected in 2003). The comment revealed not only what critics call the self-obsessed nature of the Argentine president, but also a warped perspective of the importance of this country, which seems a long way from any of America’s strategic needs or interests.

One might reasonably ask: Does the relationship matter? There was a time when the issues that concern the U.S. and those that concern Argentina were so far apart that a healthy relationship seemed not only a distant prospect, but almost irrelevant.

When the Argentine economy collapsed in debt it could not pay in 2001, the U.S. and the rest of the world folded their arms and watched the train wreck. When the U.S. suffered its own economic meltdown in 2008, Argentina – unlike Europe – scarcely noticed, buoyed by strong commodity prices for its key exports. Both periods seemed reflective of what historians here see as a long history of the two countries always seeming to be a bit out of sync with each other, rarely arriving at moments of mutual interest.

However, a dramatic, made-for-Hollywood political scandal has changed the nature of the relationship. The death of prosecutor Alberto Nisman earlier this year, days after he leveled explosive charges against the president and others, has not only put the country in conspiracy hyper-drive, which takes some doing in a culture that has made an art form of that, but brought the country into a nexus of issues that preoccupy Washington, namely, the Middle East and terrorism.

Those hot button issues came together in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, which killed 85. Nisman claimed Kirchner was involved in a devil's bargain to shield Iranian officials charged with the bombing from prosecution in exchange for oil. A scriptwriter could not have penned the next scene any better or more tragically. In the days before he was to appear before Congress to explain his allegations, Nisman told Clarín: "I might get out of this dead."

The day before his appearance before Congress, Nisman's body was found with a gunshot to the head in his Buenos Aires apartment. Was it suicide, induced suicide or murder? Nisman's ex-wife, a judge, concluded after her own private investigation of his death that it was not suicide. Nisman's original case against the President seems to have run its course in the Argentina justice system, with the highest criminal court refusing to hear it.

The Casa Rosada has denied the Nisman allegations and following Nisman's death has spun suspicions about his personal life and motivations, rather than bringing any clarity to the cause of his death. The media continue to press the case, with rarely a day going by when the Nisman story does not populate the front pages and broadcast media.

But as often as not, the case seems just the latest ground on which the media and the Kirchner administration chew up each other.

The sour relationship between media and the administration is centered in the open warfare between Clarín and the Kirchners. The relationship ruptured in 2008 when Clarín sided with the farmers in their opposition to the administration's tax plans. In 2009 the government introduced a media law that took aim at Clarín and its dominance in a range of media platforms and markets.

“It was probably the right thing to increase competition and provide space for smaller players,” said a veteran foreign correspondent who has worked here for more than a decade. “But as usual in Argentina, the context of it happening in a war with Clarín made it suspect. Right things done in the wrong context can undermine the purpose and the acceptance of a good law.” In other words, the law looked like an act of revenge.

The Argentines will elect a new president in October and U.S. officials are optimistic. “There will be a sea change in politics that the U.S. will welcome,” said an Embassy official.

However, it remains to be seen if the media “war” will undergo its own sea change, away from perennial conflict and toward a relationship with government that will better serve the public rather than confuse and deepen its hardened sense of cynicism.