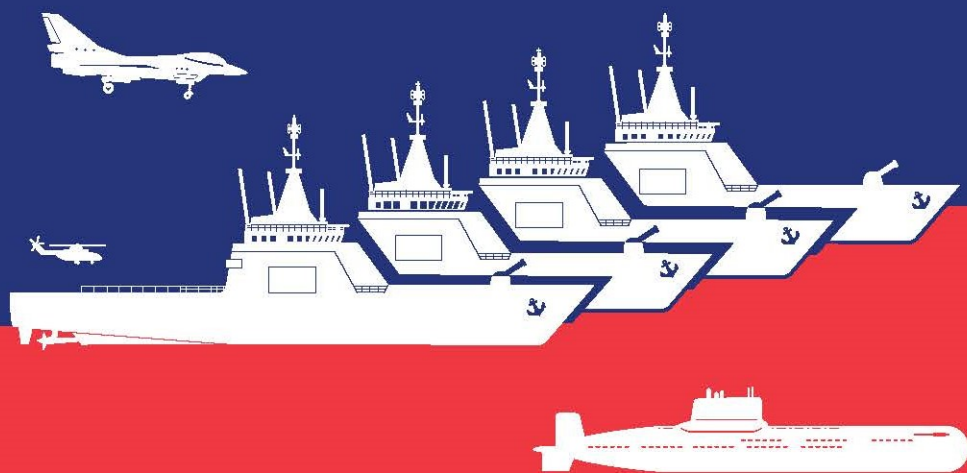


L'AFFAIRE ARGENTINE

HISTORIAS DE CORRUPCIÓN NAVAL MILITAR



RAÚL E. PODETTI

COLECCIÓN INDUSTRIA AZUL

L'AFFAIRE ARGENTINE

HISTORIES OF NAVAL CORRUPTION

Raúl E. Podetti

THE AUTHOR

Raúl E. Podetti (1958) is a naval architect and marine engineer from ITBA, MSE from the University of Michigan and MBA from IAE, and studied Law and the Economics of Climate Change at FLACSO. He has worked at marine firms in the U.S., was a shipowner, and headed his own shipyard, SANYM, founded by his father in 1964, at which they designed and built 120 ships for the local market and for export. He was vice-president of the Astillero Río Santiago the largest government-owned shipyard and of the Federation of the Argentine Shipbuilding Industry (FINA, in Spanish). He is a consultant, professor of graduate studies at ITBA and UBA and senior researcher at the FIUBA Marine Vector, a think tank on regional maritime challenges. In 2018, with his father, he published *Argentine Shipbuilding Industry – 100 Years (1937-2036)*, regarded as the most complete work on the matter. He is founder and director of the EUREKA marine innovation group and of Colección Azul.

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Prologue

... per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore: ...

Dante, 1304.

In *L' Affaire Argentine*, Podetti leads us by his father's hand to cover a story – as tragic as it is hopeful – along paths that are packed with intrigue.

Traversing them will allow us to recognize situations about which we may have heard something – always vaguely, always hazily – and to which Podetti will gradually add particulars, revealing details; the key to the vault that we will, in the end, contemplate in perplexity.

The axis of the novel attains unsuspected levels; it's impossible not to confront it with reality, evolving from intrigue to anguish.

The presence of the father imbues the story not only with the credibility he inspired, but also with the peace of mind that is essential for facing this itinerary.

I feel it is the same peace that Raúl Snr. transmitted to me as we moved along Ministry offices, the corridors of the Libertad building – Navy headquarters – or of Congress, always seeking to remove the hurdles that obstructed the path of our beloved Argentine shipbuilding industry.

He, like my father, was a Navy man. To them, honour, virtue, probity, were innate qualities that formed part of their condition as such.

The story of this novel is that of Argentina, with its qualities, its virtues, and with its degradation, the fall into the deepest of circles.

Reading it leads to the hope of awaiting a second part with a happy ending. May it be so.

Carlos María Brañas

Ingeniero Naval

Académico Titular

Academia Nacional de Ingeniería

February 5, 2020

February 6, 2020

Arenales

Naval gathering

Juan de Garay

L'Affaire Pakistanaise

PAM Project

Manuel Belgrano

L'Affaire Malaisienne

Juan D. Perón

L'Affaire Taiwanaise

Segundo Storni

Armes de Corruption Massive

L'Affaire Brésilienne

Eduardo E. Massera

L'Affaire Argentine I

Eleazar Videla

L'Affaire Argentine II

February 5, 2020

On arriving at the Coronary Care Unit at the CEMIC Sanatorium, in the Saavedra neighborhood of Buenos Aires city, I read on my cellphone: “*ARA Bouchard*, the Argentine Navy’s new offshore patrol vessel, purchased in France, has already arrived.”

I search for the complete article that records the words of the new Minister of Defense on receiving it:

The arrival of this new vessel is very good news for all Argentines and, principally, for the Navy, which needs to have the means and the equipment to allow it to perform its tasks, and thus to strengthen its self-esteem.

I am walking along the second-story corridor of the sanatorium, digesting not only the news, but likewise the minister’s words, when Diego, one of the CCU doctors, approaches and says to me:

—Raúl, I’m sorry. Your mother has just passed away.

My father, like me, received both items of news at almost the same time, and must have been mulling the same marine thoughts as I when he learned of Mother’s death. In his case it wasn’t a physician who communicated it, but his wife, Martha, herself, coming up to him with a hug to last literally forever.

Finally, Father and Mother were together again.

For her, it was the end of so many months of suffering: hospitalizations, physical hardship and, above all, heartbreak at not being able to be alongside the love of her life. And for Dad it ended the waiting to comply with the promise they had made each other a long time before.

A couple of years earlier they had gathered all their children together at the apartment on Arenales street to transmit a deep wish to us, with their customary solemnity and humor. Without beating around the bush, they told us:

—We're in no hurry, but we'd like to die together.

We almost choked on the *empanadas* (turnovers), done in the style of Salta province, with perfectly turned borders, prepared for us the day before by Ramona, the maid. In me, those ten words awakened an enormous tenderness and a smile, which they perceived by means of that ability for “visual dialogue” with which we could communicate almost anything, without uttering a word. I winked at them and raised my glass slightly to toast them – to toast that love, so simple and so gigantic, that overcame any fissure.

I am certain that all my four siblings will remember that very special announcement in their own manner, but I, even today, cannot cease to feel that physical experience and the emotion at being the witness of that love. I treasure that instant which I recall every time I see a photograph of them, or when I need to remember that loving is the only thing that really matters.

Over the last six months, since my father's death, and in the same, previous lapse of time spent as a quasi-orphan since Dad's stroke, I have deeply felt his absence. That of his love, of the unending matches on a GO board, of his balanced opinions, of memories loaded with details and, especially, of his optimistic regard, above all, of that little part of our country, Argentina, that he and I, together, wanted to transform, from the angle of our profession, into something better, much better.

Some months before Dad began to wane, we jointly presented our book *Argentine Shipbuilding Industry, 100 Years (1937-2036)*, which in a short time turned into something akin to a “bible” by being the main bibliographical reference on the sector. It was an enormous blessing that we were able to carry out that last project together. It gave us the best opportunities to chat, reminisce and share the dream of a better country, especially, as we contributed specific clues on how to achieve it, as the old man liked to say when speaking about the book:

... It is only a nautical chart that shows wrong courses and many shipwrecks; it's also a compass that points to the north for seeking a possible path to the country's development in the maritime sector.

A couple of years earlier, when I proposed to him that we should write that book, my reasons for doing so were several. On one hand, I could see that Dad was really getting old and I wanted to honor him while he was still alive, although I knew he would never have accepted a personal tribute. That's why I imagined that presenting a jointly-written book would serve, in a veiled manner, to render him that tribute that he deserved and that I needed to make public.

On the other hand, we both liked to persuade potential audiences with our ideas, whether those audiences be relatives, friends, colleagues, politicians or officials, and this idea, that of writing a book, could be a way to make those persuasive concepts last over time.

Undoubtedly, as must happen with almost everyone who decides to write a book, there was the desire for recognition.

However, there was also a reason involving pure pleasure. And it's that we had both enjoyed the many years shared at the shipyard he had founded, at which I worked and which I led until its closure.

This would be something akin to giving ourselves a new opportunity to enjoy our relationship, which had almost always centered on the subject of ships. Now, looking backwards, I'm convinced that the marine matter was the least of it, almost an excuse; what truly mattered was being close.

So it was that, steeped in that mixture of motivational ingredients, the task of writing the book got underway. And what had started out as a project to help (and honor) my old man, increasingly turned into my own. That transformation was very clear and forceful.

Something that had begun focusing on him turned that focus, during the process, on me. Isn't that something inherent in the father-son relationship? As in those stage scenes in which the light on an actor gradually dims to increasingly

spotlight another character, within a continuity that doesn't darken the essential forerunner.

The same had happened to us with another marine project, years earlier.

In 1988, after many years of working together at the shipyard and close to turning my thirties, I decided to undertake new business activities of my own. Five years later I was already consolidated in a new company of mine, which was my third attempt, since the first undertakings had failed, as often happens.

Early one morning, I get a call from Dad:

—Hello, Raulito, I wanted to invite you to have dinner here at home. I have a proposal to make to you. Here I'm hearing your mother letting you know that Ramona is going to cook your favorite dish. And she's also complaining that you're neglecting her.

—But I talked to her yesterday! All right, okay, let's turn to the evening. You want to give me an idea of what it's about?

—Look, as you know, the situation at the shipyard is very difficult. 'Convertibility' Law [the anchoring of the peso to the dollar] caught us right in the middle of the contract for exporting a series of large ships to Germany, so that we'll lose millions, and all the credits for the investment that we've made have become unpayable. So that after we deliver the last ship, the logical thing would be to ring down the curtain. Everybody thinks that would be best, that the situation is insurmountable, but I don't want that. There are almost a thousand families that depend on us; and since almost all the other shipyards have stopped working, they won't find any job. I've known their faces for years, and so have you —he made a pause before carrying on—. I don't know, I thought that maybe you'd be interested in coming back to the shipyard for a little while, to look at the situation and lend me a hand. I know you're doing very well with your new company and all that, but at least I wanted to ask.

—I understand. Let's talk it over quietly tonight. Most of all, I'll take a couple of bottles of wine, to gather courage for the madness you have in mind.

In a few weeks I had managed to organize my affairs so as to contribute some brain and muscle to that request for help which was joined by my brother Martín, a fireman capable of charging into the fiercest legal and financial corporate fire. And in that process, over the years that followed, the original motivation of “helping Dad” became diluted. Step by step it turned into my own madness.

It had the same way with the project for our book, years ago,

Had my father planned it that way when he chose to give me the same name he bore? Had I myself planned it that way when I chose to study Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering, the same career as his?

In the introduction to that book, Dad wrote:

...With Raúl Eugenio, my eldest son, I share much more than the name and the profession. We have both recognized at some point in our lives that, through this industry, we would help to make a better nation. Together we have designed and build many vessels; between the two of us we add up to a hundred years in the profession, and today we present the work that best reflects the passion we have in common.

A book that speaks about tradition and the past, as well as about continuity and the future, and about an industry that began with the Spanish conquest and became very big forty years ago, and which continues today to have what is needed to recover its greatness.

The mention of “100 years” in the book’s title was made to stress that the work, while detailing the shipbuilding industry’s development over the previous 80 years – since 1937 – above also projects and proposes the paths to its possible recovery over the next 20, up to 2036.

Dad and I agreed, precisely, that one of the pillars of the beginning of the recovery of “maritime Argentina” (as in so many other fields) depended on civilian and military officials preferring the welfare of Argentines over their own and that

of other citizens of the world. It seems obvious and is almost a minimal demand to public servants, but it's one which unfortunately isn't usually the case.

Nevertheless, the 100 years also hid another, more personal reason. Between the two of us, we added up to a century of devotion to marine engineering and its industry.

February 6, 2020

That news of the arrival of the offshore patrol vessel had made an impact on my father and on me alike.

The arrival was being celebrated of a ship that was built in France and that should have been made in our country, which has the capacity and needs to work, to develop and to save foreign currency.

I couldn't stop thinking that since 1994 we had been working together on that ship construction project, overcoming all manner of difficulties, denouncing many attempts at direct purchases abroad, always overpriced and unnecessary, confronting ministers, admirals and politicians.

I imagined my father receiving the news and immediately asking Mom to help him write a letter to the Minister of Defense, in response to the latter's words of welcome to the ship originating in France. That was because in recent years, due to maculopathy, Dad had lost much of his sight and Martha would very patiently – sometimes, less so – write and read for him. That help made it possible for him to participate in the last part of our book and also to get through the months he had to spend in a recovery clinic following a stroke. Sitting down wherever it was, Mom would read the news – ever less of it – and poetry – ever more of it – while he looked at her and listened spellbound. He would then again be that young Navy midshipman whom Marthita, dazzling as always and having just graduated from the Lenguas Vivas (Living Languages) teaching institution, awaited or saw him off from the port of Buenos Aires in the 1950s.

—Martha, can you help me write a letter?

—But Raúl, I've just come in. Don't be a bore, — she'd say only to repent and give way — Let me get something to write on and we'll start.

February 6, 2020

Mr. Minister of Defense

I apologize in advance for the involuntary mistakes in my writing. They are due to the fact that this is the first letter I write since I died.

It is with regret that I have just read the news of the arrival in Buenos Aires of *ARA Bouchard*, a patrol vessel built in France for our Navy as part of the unnecessary importation of a larger fleet that is to arrive over the coming years.

With all due respect, I would like to make some remarks regarding your welcoming words, with the aim not of making a correction but rather a reflection.

Since you mention that the arrival of this ship is “very good news for all Argentines,” I would like to ask you to exclude me from that group, and not because I don’t feel truly Argentine.

No, Mr. Minister, this is very good news only for the small group of civilian and military officials who, in noncompliance with their obligation to safeguard Argentine work and welfare, have forced this purchase which is so inconvenient.

Real very good news for all Argentines – save the above small group – would have been to receive those vessels as the fruit of domestic work and ingenuity by virtue of our industry, which is perfectly capable of building them under the same conditions. Right afterwards, you mention that “the Navy needs to have the means and the equipment to allow it to perform its tasks, and thus to strengthen its self-esteem.”

I couldn’t agree more on that need for re-equipment, from my double earthly condition as a former Navy officer and a former shipbuilding industry entrepreneur. In my last years, along with my son Raúl, I promoted many projects to appropriately equip our naval forces, but

always considering that the competitive and broad participation of our fellow countrymen at local shipyards was essential. Nevertheless, I disagree with you that such an improper purchase as this will help to “strengthen the self-esteem” of the Navy.

No, Mr. Minister, improper actions like this one do nothing to assist the true self-esteem of a noble Navy officer. Corrupt actions only help to stain the high values of the Navy. I would like to conclude by sharing with you my words at a past meeting on Production for Defense Seminar at that same ministry which you lead.

“Domestic industry’s participation in the world’s navies has been present since the dawn of world history. Going through the saga of great naval episodes suffices to always come across confronting fleets that flew the flag of the countries in which they were built. That’s because naval conflict was a clash not only between the courage and ability of seamen, but also between the technology and labor of their countrymen, in the design and the construction of their ships.”

Yours faithfully,

Raúl Rafael Podetti

Marine engineer

PS: My son Raúl is sure to send you a copy of our book which describes the precedents for this regrettable case of patrol vessels purchased abroad.

—Thanks, Martha. I think that’s good enough. What would also be good would be to send a Letter to the Editor at the *La Nación* newspaper for people to find out about this dreadful ‘good news’. I hope Raulito will think of it. What do you think?

—Leave your son alone. From here you can no longer do anything. Besides, he’s sure to think of it himself, and he’ll do it wonderfully. The apple doesn’t fall

far... What were you thinking of doing with this letter? How are you going to get it to the minister? There's no mail here – have you thought of that?

—Good point, Martha. Since you're a recent arrival, you'll be finding out by and by of some operational rules at this new posting. Here they have the Celestial Rules on Unilateral Communications (CERUC). It means that from here we can send messages, letters, warnings, etc., but not directly, nor do we know when or how they'll be getting them. The answer will reach us, if we're patient – time is of no consequence here – in the form of the actions that the earthly recipient eventually takes. That way we'll see if he got the message and also what he does with it. That's the way it works and has worked for all eternity, so there must be something to be said for it.

—It sounds like fun — Martha replies, thoughtfully. — I think I'll get used to it. From here we can write, say or think of something for someone, but don't know how it'll get there. It reminds me of something Claudia, Raulito's wife, said about books following unforeseen and surprising paths. One must be concerned with the message and trust that it will find the way to reach its destination, which might not be the one we had in mind.

I love this thing of trusting the force of the message and imagining our having the power to give it the breath of life that'll endow it with a spirit of its own.

The main thing, then, is that the letter has been written.

Arenales

No sooner had the first few, bitter days passed of the farewell to Mother, stamped by all manner of paperwork, the wake and the words of encouragement and warmth from an enormous number of friends, I gathered strength to reenter the apartment on Arenales street where my parents had lived over the last years.

It felt strange to open the door to that beloved dwelling without hearing the voice of either of them inviting me in with the infectious joy of a person thankful for a highly desired visit. On such a case they would both stop what they were doing and get ready to enjoy the encounter.

Mom would hurry to set another plate on the table, be it for lunch, teatime or dinner, as a strategy for retaining me some extra time within those walls. Meanwhile, Dad would offer me a drink, settle down in his favorite armchair and issue his typical:

—What a nice visit! Tell me something, whatever. What are you up to?

Those were moments of great transparency, at which they never hid the great happiness they got from the meeting and my setting time aside for them. How often did I fall into that same and wonderful trap they were laying out for me, staying with them for hours, when my idea had been to stop over for just a few minutes!

Dazed by the silence of their absence I walked through the bedrooms, the living room, the dining room, poured myself a drink, and sat down in the usual place, facing Dad's favorite armchair, closing my eyes to hear them better. The more I let myself go, the clearer I heard the familiar sounds, whispers, and even some argument between them for which Father was invariably responsible for having misplaced or forgotten something; he would admit his guilt with a smile and a jest.

Emerging from this joyful trance, I got ready to delve into the project which, at that time, I didn't know would take me several weeks: classifying and ordering the files with shipbuilding industry papers which Dad had gathered over the years and

which flooded bookcases, boxes and closets in his office. I was sure to end up throwing many papers away, but also hoped to find some gems I'd like to keep.

I worked for several hours in that office in which we had so often met and plunged into long conversations or enmeshed ourselves in interminable arguments.

How I longed for one more stretch of that!

I was doing quite well with the sorting, which meant that the pile of stuff to throw away was bigger than the other, when, suddenly, I realized that, for the third time, one of the copies of our book had fallen out of the stack.

When I kneeled down to pick it up, I discovered the newspaper dated last February 5, open at the page which reported the arrival of the French-made patrol vessel in Buenos Aires. What was that newspaper doing there? Who had left it there? One of my brothers or sisters, or Ramona, who would have been cleaning during those days and might have brought it into the office?

At that point I experienced a *déjà vu* moment. Several times and in that same place, on the occasion of the appointment of new government officials with an impact on the naval area, Dad would propose, "Let's send him a copy of the book. What do you think?"

And without waiting for an answer, he would hand me a pen and a copy opened on the first blank page, to suggest a pointed personal dedication, the text of which ultimately was the result of a negotiation between our two styles.

It was instantaneous, almost a reflex action. I shifted the stacked-up papers to make some room and write a dedication to the Minister of Defense on the first page of the book; Dad used to say that that sheet was left blank precisely for that purpose.

I placed it in a large envelope to take it to the ministry. I seemed to hear Dad saying, "First thing tomorrow morning," since, according to him, that's the way important things ought to be done – a logic which I never fully understood, but which I've applied many times in my life.

After several hours of going through papers, and thinking already of calling it a day, I found a box containing papers on the PAM Project (in Spanish *Proyecto PAM Patrulleros de Alta Mar – Offshore Patrol Vessels*): it was a project based on a request from the Navy to our shipyard, SANYM, in 1994.

After much toing and froing, and twenty-five years of frustrated efforts on our part, that proposal had ended in the worst fashion with the purchase of the ships abroad.

It was precisely that “toing and froing” that filled that box I had in front of me: the gem hidden among so many files.

It was very late, so I merely gave it a quick run-through. There were official letters exchanged with ministers, admirals, legislators, ambassadors, as well as cuttings from the front pages of the *La Nación* and *Clarín* dailies with strident reports of corruption linked to that project over the years. Almost all the papers were originals, but... what was I going to do with those materials? I had no idea.

I put the box aside in order to delve into it on my next visit. Then I looked around for my parents in order to offer my farewell,

—Bye, old-timers! See you!

And I closed my eyes in order to hear their customary reply, almost in unison:

—We’ll be expecting you tomorrow, Raulito!

Even after I became an adult, the oldsters continued to refer to me – to the end of their days – with the diminutive “Raulito,” obviously by reason of my being the son of Raúl Snr. And, after keeping on hearing it from Dad, even some of the people at the shipyard referred to me as the engineer Raulito.

Naval gathering

From Heaven, you can see and hear everything that goes on below, on Earth, but you cannot intervene directly. That's the way it is. There have already been complaints and all that, but they're obdurate regarding these rules.

—Martha, I've just seen that Raulito has been tidying up my office at Arenales, and is going to send the book to the minister. Let's hope it does some good!

—That's great, Raúl! That son of yours is still so patient! But at this point I'm more interested in your finding those papers you've mislaid and that we need to submit tomorrow.

—Yes, of course, as soon as I get back, I'll continue to look for them. I have a naval gathering, which could be important.”

—You're getting together with your class at the Navy School?

—Not exactly. The group is somewhat more varied than that. I'd better tell you later. I'm already late.

One of the advantages of this new reality, I reflected as I walked to the meeting, is that one has direct access to famous characters from very different periods, who in addition are frequently open to talking and eager to continue participating in the life of the nation, albeit with obvious limitations.

Taking advantage of this convenience, I had invited some of the outstanding historical personalities involved in the country's shipbuilding activity. This time I wanted to share with them my concern over the continuation of the nation's bad marine policies and in particular the serious case of the imported offshore patrol vessels.

Some of the guests, who were there waiting for me, were Juan de Garay, General Manuel Belgrano, Vice-Admiral Segundo Storni and Admiral Eleazar Videla.¹

I apologized for my brief tardiness and, right away, brought them up to date on the most recent decades of decadence of marine activity in Argentina. I told them

about the disappearance of the necessary role of the national State in the marine sphere, of the end of marine financing and of the national merchant navy, of the promotion of tax-free mass importation of secondhand vessels and of the drop in competitiveness of government-owned shipyards and closure of a large part of their private counterparts.

But starting in 2014, the biggest and worst public purchases of all time had begun, purchases carried out abroad, avoiding local industry and in an extremely irregular manner. I detailed the cases of the research vessels for the National Fishery Research Institute (INIDEP), fraudulently bought from a shipyard in Spain, of the river patrol boats for the Coast Guard (*Prefectura*) that were purchased in a very strange manner from a shipyard in Israel, of the secondhand tugs for use by the ENARSA state-owned oil, natural gas and electricity enterprise, and I dwelled, above all, on the aberrant case of the patrol vessels for the Navy.

1- Juan de Garay (1528–1583), explorer, conqueror, colonial governor and founder of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe. Along with Don Pedro de Mendoza, he was one of the first promoters of shipbuilding on the shores of the River Plate, some five hundred years ago.

Manuel Belgrano (1770-1820), lawyer, journalist, politician and militar, creator in 1812 of the Argentine flag and member of the Congress that declared independence in 1816. He was the first defender of our marine interests, promoting the merchant fleet and the naval industry against the mighty foreign powers that were intent on keeping us submerged in the unmerited spot of eternal importers of ships.

Segundo Storni (1876-1954), vice-admiral in Argentine Navy. An outstanding intellectual who developed the doctrine known as “Argentine Interests in the Sea,” warning his colleagues in arms to avoid the mirage that consisted in believing that the mere purchase of ships abroad would strengthen naval power, insisting on the essential participation of domestic industry in order to consolidate the nation.

Eleazar Videla (1881-1960), Argentine admiral and Navy Minister. In 1934, and in the midst of a major crisis, he set in motion the successful project that, for the first time, built nine military vessels

at domestic state-owned and private shipyards, launching our country's modern maritime industry, which grew until the mid-1980s.

Garay, incredulous, bellowed with rage; Belgrano, furious, paced around in circles dreaming up some revolutionary strategy, while Storni and Videla, hurt by the betrayal by their own comrades, asked me for more concrete details and data. A big uproar had been generated and we had been debating it for a long while, but no specific action to be carried out had arisen.

In the midst of these matters, another guest came up, greeting us with a big smile and his customary: "Companions!". It was General Juan Domingo Perón, former president, military and promoter of domestic industry, the founder in 1953 of the State Marine Shipyards and Factories (*Astilleros y Fábricas Navales del Estado*, AFNE), the country's biggest shipbuilding plant, created under that period's overmanned and vertically integrated Soviet model, which attained great performance until the mid-1980s.

After he and I had said hello, we began our typical ritual of exchanging banter over the fact of having been on opposite sides of the Liberating Revolution [Perón's ouster in 1955], when I was merely a young midshipman. We always ended up recalling Doctor "Don Pancho" Luco, my father-in-law, Martha's father. The general had known him and respected him highly when "the doctor" had been a Peronist senator for the province of San Luis. He even remembered that, for our wedding in 1956, Dr. Luco had been in exile in Chile, so that he couldn't attend. I would give the tale its final twist by stating that he wouldn't have attended gladly anyway, since this was his worst nightmare: his eldest daughter was marrying a Navy officer. A "gorilla" [strong anti-Peronist]! We ended up laughing over these life stories.

I quickly brought Perón up to speed on the matters we had been dealing with and on the concern shared by the entire group.

The president pondered for some minutes and then proposed to us an action plan which, with some observations, we immediately accepted. He called one of his auxiliaries, a specialist in mass mobilizations, and gave him precise instructions.

Right away he drew up a proposal for a Public Statement, which we signed with minimal corrections, and we distributed a number of protest signs among ourselves. His personal photographer took a series of photos of us which Perón would get distributed, along with the Public Statement, through another auxiliary, his press officer.

SHIPBUILDING INDUSTRY - STATEMENT

Having learned of aberrant events that continue to prevent the development of the nation's maritime industry, as part of the country's maritime interests, and with a resolute patriotic calling in no way limited by the spiritual condition held in common by the undersigned, we emphatically demand that:

- An investigation and earthly justice be carried out (we'll take charge of heavenly justice here) with regard to the cases of highly irregular governmental maritime purchases in recent years (2014-2019) for INIDEP, ENARSA, PNA and ARA, which in addition to placing an exaggerated burden on the public purse and increasing indebtedness, have explicitly avoided participation by the Argentine people, who have the capacity and are in need of work, in providing those vessels for the country.
- Special stress be laid on the case of the case of the fleet of offshore patrol vessels that is being imported from France, following a forcible direct purchase, illegal and detrimental, carried out at an excessive price from the shipyard which prestigious researchers have pointed out as the most corrupt in the world.
- Modification be made, urgently and with true vocation for the country, of the policies that for decades have been promoting the mass importation of mainly secondhand ships used for fishing, transport, dredging, tug work, etc., preventing the normal development of the country's industry despite the major infrastructure in government-owned shipyards and the competitiveness of private ones.
- An investigation be made of the detrimental direct negotiation between the Navy and a Finnish company for a polar vessel excluding consideration, for no reason, of other, better options and the participation of Argentine maritime and Antarctic specialists

- The participation be investigated and forbidden, in the case of the polar vessel or of other maritime purchases, of military officials, in active service or retired, who have participated in the case of the imported patrol vessels.

The signatures and shows of support follow.

Conqueror Juan de Garay

General Manuel Belgrano

Admiral Segundo Storni

Navy Minister Eleazar Videla

President Juan Domingo Perón

Marine Engineer Raúl Rafael Podetti



In the face of the group's enthusiasm, and before it became diluted, I proposed that each one should think about the way to transmit the message of concern to the

civilian or military officials with the greatest affinity to them, transmitting some personal experience and showing their disagreement with current maritime policy. I suggested that, if possible, they do so in writing and attach some element that might illustrate the subject so as to draw the attention of the recipients and best capture their interest.

Naturally, General Perón reserved for himself the right to write to the president of Argentina. There was quite some confusion among the group regarding the way to get their messages through, in the face of which, Perón summoned another assistant to give help to the assemblage.

He was a much younger man than us, clearly from another generation: he dressed in an unkempt manner and sported numberless tattoos and a quite strange haircut, so that the members of the group regarded him with a certain mistrust. Perón, smiling as always, calmed them by saying,

—Relax, companions. Behind his appearance, Benjamín is a genius at something new that has appeared on Earth and that is termed “social networks”. If I had known this lad earlier it would have saved me a lot of going out onto the balcony and getting sore throats from shouting at the crowds.

So, without further ado, I introduce “Benja”, the companion influencer, who has just been telling me that our public statement is already filtering into the main terrestrial news portals. Subliminally, our message will begin to make its way into journalistic content over the next few days.

When you have readied your messages, call him and he'll see to it that they reach their destination in the best possible manner. Also, he has already set up a WhatsApp group named “Marine Heaven” which includes us all. You can find the photo and the public announcement in it.

More confused than before, but placing our trust in Benja, we spread out, each one with his allotted task. Before leaving, I approached the young man and asked him to add my son Raúl to the new group of messages that are read on tiny cellphones. With a smile, he explained he had already attempted it with a new, still experimental software, but that with the restrictions placed by the Celestial Rules

on Unilateral Communications (CERUC), messages to Earth would get there, but emptied of content.

Satisfied with the meeting, I undertook the way back. Soon, and very close by, I made out a mysterious group of young people, seemingly foreigners, men and women, talking among themselves and looking in the direction of our meeting place, as if interested in the matter, but without making up their minds to come up closer.

I couldn't stay to find out more because it was already late and I needed to get back to continue searching for the papers I had misplaced, and which Martha would inexorably demand that I find.

After leaving the Arenales apartment, I was still hearing my parents' imaginary goodbye on my departure. How I longed to once again really hear that marvelous and hopeful, "Raulito, we'll be expecting you tomorrow."

Back home again, I was ready to lie down a while and take my mind off everything – which, in modern parlance, goes by the name of "Netflix" – when my attention was drawn by a sound on the cellphone: someone I didn't know had added me to a new WhatsApp group strangely named "Marine Heaven." There was no written message.

I've never understood that habit of adding you to a group, however virtual it be, without asking you first if you want to participate. So, as I usually do in such cases, I didn't answer. I had become hooked on a movie that Claudia and I were watching while drinking a chilled wine. It was about a famous American football player who suffers an accident; by mistake, an angel carries away his soul, and for that reason the quarterback must be reincarnated in several persons before finding his new physical body: *Heaven Can Wait* won a 1978 Oscar.

What a coincidence! — I said aloud, when I connected the WhatsApp, I had received and the movie's name.

—What? — asked Claudia, intrigued.

—No, nothing important. Another glass of wine?

Juan de Garay

A group of persons was quietly enjoying the view of a celestial sea. I walked towards one of the gentlemen with whom I had set up the meeting and was intercepted by an escort of arquebusiers and soldiers wearing light armor. But soon, on seeing me, Don Juan de Garay dismissed his escort, dismounted from his steed and approached me with an apology over his unkempt appearance, without making mention of the strong smell that indicated a number of days without a bath.

—Don Raúl, — Garay began with the unmistakable lilt of his native Burgos — having noted your good zeal and sincere love for your people, upon providing meditated attention to the maritime news on our beloved lands on the River Plate, and after having exchanged views with my predecessor, and in a certain way historical competitor, Don Pedro de Mendoza, I have set a brief record down in writing. It is directed at the viceroys, governors, mayors or whatever name they now go by, in charge of the riverside territories of those cherished lands that I proudly conquered for his Sacred Catholic Majesty. I beg you to allow me to share this Writ with you and beseech you to listen to it indulgently, without heeding the poor order of my writing since I have lost the style for lack of practice. If it meets your pleasure, I shall be dispatched in all urgency on the first brigantine available for sailing.

—Delighted — I answered succinctly after such a lengthy and elaborate introduction, but changing position, upwind of the smelly conquistador, in order to breathe more freely.

—Lieutenant, hand me the Writ — Don Juan told one of his bodyguards, even more foul-smelling and dishevelled than he.

—This is how it begins — Garay said as he cleared this throat and opened an impressive scroll, written in longhand with careful penmanship.

Most Excellent Sirs

Viceroy, Governors and Mayors of the riverside territories of the
Rivers Plate and Paraná and Coast of the Mare Australis.

Along with Don Pedro we have taken cognizance through Don Raúl, naval *maestre* who has recently arrived in these heights, of the pressing situation in our beloved lands on the River Plate. We cannot but be amazed by such regression when it was precisely I, in 1580, and Don Pedro several years earlier, who were impressed by the vigorous maritime construction activities that began to be carried out along those shores, holding the promise of speedily becoming a true maritime power. I must begin by confessing to you that it wasn't our initial purpose to found a new city, but above all to establish a port, a slipway for our vessels. The reason was that the oceangoing ships that arrived from Spain were in urgent need of repair and were in addition useless for sailing up the rivers to the North. We needed to build a new fleet.

We found that the natives already had their own incipient maritime industry which in 1531 was well described by the Portuguese navigator Dom Pedro López de Souza:

...Their canoes were from 10 to 12 braces in length, and half a brace in beam, of very well carved cedar wood. They were crewed by some forty standing men with long spades on the end of which were feathered tufts and tassels... Some were up to 80 feet long and we counted more than five hundred.

With materials brought in from Spain added to others that were found in abundance on these lands and under the supervision of the "masters of ship construction, caulkers and riverside carpenters," brought on board by my predecessor the very provident Don Pedro, the natives began to be taught to repair and build vessels of larger size, needed for continuing our conquering expedition.

Shortly, seven brigantines of forty men each were available, with which the navigation of the Paraná was begun in search of the silver mines. With brigantines built at the city of Santísima Trinidad and its port of Santa María de los Buenos Aires, Captains Salazar de Espinoza and González Mendoza in 1537 founded the port and “fortified house” of Nuestra Señora de Santa María de la Asunción, where shipyards were also established. There we built the fleet with which, in 1580, I arrived from the North on the expedition for the “repopulation of Buenos Aires.” In order to carry the news to Spain I successfully dispatched the carvel *San Cristóbal*, wholly built in these lands, with a load of hides, sugar, preserves and other products.

Years earlier, in 1545, the carvel *Comuneros*, of local construction, had already traveled to Spain, arriving successfully and in only sixty days, which heightened enthusiasm for the construction of brigantines, many vessels and seagoing ships that met with admiration in Europe.

Very powerful Sirs,

I leave to you, in the name of Don Pedro and my own, these reflections in the hope that they may provide you with guidance in support of the recovery of this activity which, as you can see, was already thriving almost five hundred years ago.

As proof, please receive an illustration of that famous 11th of June of 1580 in which you can make out our real intention on arriving at the shores of the River Plate. I recall and share my brief opening words on that day:

I, Juan de Garay, in conformity with the royal instructions given to the Frontier Governor [Adelantado], on this the day of St. Bernabé, standing at this port of Santa María de los Buenos Ayres, launch a shipyard with shipbuilding masters, caulkers, soldiers, people and natives of the site which I at present have...

I entreat you the mercy of the assistance that may be required for allowing these people to return, at least, to the development they had somewhat more than five centuries ago.

On the ninth day of the month of February of 2020, the day of St. Reinaldo, martyr.

The humble and least son of the Sacred Catholic Royal Majesty, knight of the nobility and conquistador,

Juan de Garay



—I find this a very good Writ — I remarked — but the idea of awaiting the next brigantine in order to send it may not be the best. Remember the help that has been offered to us by the master influencer. I just met him on the road and he

explained he was thinking of making an animated video for TikTok, with your participation.

Seeing his look of confusion, I added:

—It's like the same painting of the founding, but with movement and sound, in which you narrate all this.

—I do not understand, but trust your good judgment — he said resolutely, and instructed his escort to locate that master TikTok and deliver the Writ to him for the speaking painting to arrive at its destination in as speedy and safe a manner as the brigantines built on the River Plate.

—Be sure to make him understand — he declared in conclusion — that his life depends on it.

—Maybe that isn't much of a threat for someone who is already up here — I remarked, trying to inject a little humor into the tense moment, as we said goodbye.

I had just spoken lengthily over the cellphone with my daughter, Sofía, who is earning her master's degree in Britain. It was so easy to make the communication, I thought, recalling the phone calls with Father and Mother when I was studying in the U.S., kept so short because of what they cost us at the time. A "ping" sound on my cellphone wrested me away from these memories. It was a notification of an entry in WhatsApp: a video sent to the recent "Marine Heaven" group, which couldn't be opened. Following my survival instinct regarding computer viruses, I erased it and continued reading the Sunday newspaper.

Suddenly Claudia said to me:

—Raúl, have you got the paper? When you can, read the Letter to the Editor I marked out for you, and give me your opinion. It's precisely on the subject of a book on which I'm working now.

As I was looking for that section of the newspaper, I recalled that Dad, in the face of any serious situation that merited condemnation, would say, "I must write a letter to *La Nación*." Sofía used to compare that attitude of Dad's with mine of demanding the complaints book at restaurants, hotels or airports in cases of poor service, while she squirmed in embarrassment.

Reaching the Letters to the Editor section brought the subject to my mind that I hadn't been able, nor had wanted, to stop thinking about: the purchase of ships from France. And, as Father would have proposed, I instantly knew that the matter merited sending a letter to *La Nación*.

L’Affaire Pakistanaise

It’s been several days since Martha has arrived in Heaven, but she has hardly left the house, and when I ask her for the reason, she explains to me that she doesn’t know where to go, is totally unfamiliar with the area and doesn’t know if she’ll like the neighborhood.

That’s when I realize that I had never spoken to her about the Rule of Elective Celestial Landscapes (RUECL), thanks to which, by only wishing it, one is instantly transported to that special place, and can even choose the weather and the time. “That’s one hell of an invention!” I think, although I promise myself not to repeat that expression in public, so as to avoid problems with celestial authority.

—It is too good to be true — Martha says — I think this place is Paradise and I’ll stay to live here— she adds as she rummages around her thousands of brochures from the time when she was a travel agent, in order to start to choose places to visit.

I say goodbye to Martha and go out for a walk.

I saunter through a meadow crammed with those marvelous yellow wildflowers that extend to the literally infinite horizon. After a while I realize that I’m being followed by someone had already crossed paths with me several times during my walks in Heaven; he always looked at me enigmatically and kept on walking as if awaiting some signal from me. I thought I recognized him as a member of that mysterious group of young foreigners who had been watching us when we got together at the meeting of historical maritime characters.

At a given moment I was able to get a closer look at him. He was outfitted in working clothes such as are worn at shipyards: coveralls, laced boots and hardhat. It immediately brought to my mind that I too dressed that way to work on the repair of military vessels at the Buenos Aires Naval Arsenal, during my first years as marine engineer in the Navy.

But there was something strange about this young man, as I gradually discovered as he came closer. Several parts of his skin were severely burned and he walked with a limp. I decided to walk in such a way as to shorten the last meters separating us. As he was reaching me, he almost fainted, so that I hurriedly held him and then sat him on a nearby tree trunk.

—*Merci beacoup, ingénieur*— he thanked me as he accepted a drink of water from a flask, I gave him.

—How are you feeling? Can I help you? What happened to you? — I asked, meanwhile thanking the rules of communication we have up here, under which we can all understand one another, independently of each one's language. It's a great invention and here we call it "anti-Babelism."

—I'm feeling better, *merci*.

—Why have you been following me? — I continued to probe,

—*Pardon*, but I was afraid. I have been looking for you since I heard you speaking the other day of the case of the offshore patrol boats and the French shipyard.

—Afraid? Why should you be afraid?

—The thing is, I work, or, better said, used to work for that same French state-owned shipyard that participated in the dirty deal with your patrol ships. And I, obviously, am French," he said, lowering his head as if ashamed.

—But no, please! — I replied — I've got nothing against the French people! On the contrary, my maternal grandfather, Dr. Carlos Alric, who in 1917 was the governor of San Luis province, where I was born, was the son of a French immigrant, so that my mother always instilled in us the high values of French culture. Thinking about it, it may be that this admiration for the French people is also one of the reasons for my special pain over the matter of those patrol vessels.

Seeing him more relaxed now, I pressed on with my original inquiry:

—"What happened to you? What's with your appearance? Why are you up here, being so young?

—I'll tell you, *monsieur ingénieur*. In 2002 I was in Karachi, Pakistan, in charge of the technical team at the state-owned French shipyard, to finish the work of delivering the three submarines that France had sold Pakistan in 1994.

The night of May 8, when we left the quay with the submarines, on my way back home along with thirteen other fellow workers, there was this terrible explosion that caused us to fly through the air. We all died instantly.

At first it was thought that the car bomb was part of Al Qaeda hostilities, but the investigation found that it was an act of revenge. It was set by a Pakistani officer angry at the French shipyard because it had stopped paying the bribes, they had agreed on for getting them the contract. The three direct perpetrators were quickly found and sentenced to death.

As the head of the Pakistani Navy himself admitted in 1997, the French shipyard bribed them to make sure of obtaining the contract, but part of those payments had to be sent back to finance politics in France.

At first, those illegal payments were made as planned, but soon afterwards the new French president discovered that those bribes had financed the campaign of his opponent, the former prime minister, and he ordered a halt to new illegal payments, and that, obviously, angered many people.

From that investigation it also emerged that the French shipyard had applied the same *modus operandi* to get the contract for three *Lafayette*-class frigates for Saudi Arabia to the tune of some 3.4 billion dollars, far more than the Pakistani case which was of “only” 1 billion dollars. To handle the backflow of part of those illegal payments, the shipyard's international director, always with cane and champagne in hand, and the French Defense Minister made use of two local intermediaries who deposited the commissions in a company owned by the French shipyard in Luxembourg.

—Stunning. But how did you manage to find all this out?

—When we were there, we had heard that funny stuff was going on, but we preferred not to get involved and devote ourselves to doing our job so as to get back home as soon as possible and see our families— he pointed out, showing me

a charred photograph of his daughters and his wife—. But then we found out that the same conclusion was being reached in several places, like the investigation published in the *Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption*, of Tufts University of the U.S., and the leaking of the secret *Nautilus* 2002 report, published by the French online journal *Mediapart* in 2008. This triggered a larger judicial investigation promoted by the families of the victims, my parents among them— the young man showed me another photo almost destroyed by fire—. Because of its size and because both countries were involved, it was called *L’Affaire Pakistanaise*.

In 2014, a French judge confirmed the charges and three years later, in 2017, the former prime minister and the French Defense Minister were formally included in the investigation of that government-owned shipyard because of its actions in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

—And that same year, 2017— I reflected —was precisely when the Argentine Navy defined that same French shipyard as the “sole capable and ideal” candidate to provide our patrol ships, despite all warnings and the fact that this scandal was already out in the open.

—*Oui, Monsieur Raoul*. I wanted to tell you this to help you keep the corruption from advancing so quickly and stealing the jobs of some of you and the lives of others *Je m’excuse au nom du peuple français*—. he said as he said goodbye amid sincere tears.

As I watched him going away, I realized I hadn’t even asked him his name. Without wasting another moment and in haste lest I forget some of the details, I looked for my white pencil. While I was sharpening it, I ordered my thoughts so as to draw the “crime scene” on a black paperboard in my Canson-brand block. It was one the habits I retained since infancy in Villa Mercedes, San Luis province. The fact is that my carelessness with objects and my mania for misplacing everything comes from way back. At school I was always losing my colored pencils and in compensation rounded out my pencil pouch with pencils I cadged from the other kids, who only gave up those they discarded as useless – the white ones. That way I hoped to pass the weekly inspection of school equipment to which we were

subjected by my mother, who, seeing my desperation, pretended not to notice. It was very touching to discover that my third child, Martín, went through the same situation years later, although with less luck, under the withering look of Martha, who periodically carried out strict inspections of school pen-and-pencil pouches.

I was glad that my maculopathy only affected my ability to read, allowing me to still draw passably.

Satisfied with the result and remembering what my fleeting friend had said, I titled the drawing *L’Affaire Pakistanaise*, and immediately thought, “What would Raulito say if we called our case *L’Affaire Argentine?*”



The days that followed Mother's death were intense and that feeling was heightened by the fact that when thinking of her, I imagined them both, together, and with that I also felt closer to Dad. It was as if I needed them to be able to comply with their loving last wish to depart (almost) together in order to create the space for my grieving. Before, with only Dad absent, I couldn't close that circle. I was experiencing what it is said about ghosts, that they are like spirits wandering the Earth because they still have pending matters. I think I had been living through something like that in the months before, during which I felt that someone was "wandering about." And now, with the two of them together again, there was nothing pending. There were no more ghosts.

In one of the boxes, I brought with me from Arenales, to inspect it at my ease at home, I found stacks of photos of when we were kids, at ship christenings and at barbeques at the shipyard. In one of them, I made out Héctor – my daughter Sofía's other grandfather, very young and already with no hair – during the first years of his Alianza shipyard, when he worked with SANYM, the corporation of my father and his partners, the engineers Marini and Garro.

There were also news clippings and letters to the editor that had been published in relation to the Navy patrol vessel scandals in their 1998, 2006 and 2010 versions.

I then remembered that I still had to write a letter to the newspaper, which if published would be the "2020 version" of the case, now narrating the sad arrival of *ARA Bouchard*. I sat at my laptop and wrote it almost in one go, as if someone were dictating it to me.

Claudia made some appropriate style changes, complying with the strictly demanded limit of 1,000 characters, and I emailed it to *La Nación*.

ARA Bouchard

A few days ago, the first patrol vessel in a fleet built in France for the Argentine Navy arrived in the country. It is the largest naval purchase in our history (some 400 million dollars). It was made in late 2018, in a direct and illegal manner, and a large overprice was paid to the French government-owned shipyard, reportedly the leader of world naval corruption, additionally avoiding the thousands of Argentines who have the capability and are in need of work.

The new Defense Minister welcomed *ARA Bouchard* stating that it is “very good news for all Argentines.” I must respectfully and firmly dissent, as I believe this is good news only for the handful of civilian and military officials who, in noncompliance with their obligations, have pushed through such a highly inconvenient purchase. It would have been real good news to receive these ships as the fruit of domestic work and ingenuity, as prescribed by reason, the law and the competitive proposals for domestic construction that were submitted.

The minister also stated that with these vessels the Navy could “strengthen its self-esteem.” I must again dissent: improper actions in no way assist the self-esteem of a noble naval officer. Actions taken against the national interest stain the Navy’s high values.

PAM Project

Several days passed before I decided to return to Arenales.

It hadn't been for lack of interest. On the contrary, I had a burning wish to get back to that office and continue putting things in order and uncovering gems, like the PAM Project box that patiently awaited my return.

My delay was due to the fact that for several days I was almost immobilized by a pinched sciatic nerve. Everyone told me, and was doubtlessly right, that it was the body's logical reaction to so much strain during those last days of Mom's, followed by days both emotional and stressful.

But more than a month had passed and I had now recovered sufficiently to go back to Arenales. And so I did.

On entering, I made my customary greeting from the half-opened door, "Hello, golden-agers!" – hoping also to hear the habitual reply, "Not aged and not golden either!" followed by the fast steps that ended in a kiss, a long embrace and the invitation to have a drink and sit down to tell them "stories", whatever would lengthen our time together.

I went through to the office, where I found everything just as I had left it that afternoon of the start of my marine archeological dig. I cleared the table to delve into the content of the celebrated box which faithfully awaited me. On opening it, the first thing I found was a photo of Dad and I at our shipyard, SANYM. It must have been in mid-1995, because it was taken at the launching of the *Gianfranco*, the last in a very long series of modern high-seas fishing vessels that we had built for fishing companies in Argentina and abroad. On that occasion we were celebrating the shipyard's thirtieth anniversary, and the delivery of our ship number 100, additionally announcing our strategic association with P&O, an international maritime colossus.

It had been a little over a year since I had agreed to go back to work at SANYM. Some differences of views with Dad had previously led me to resign and devote myself to personal entrepreneurial undertakings, but in 1994 I responded to his request to

come back to help him try to save the company, which was in a terminal crisis as a result of the new policies that were destroying the shipbuilding industry. In the late 1980s, we had invested millions to modernize our shipyard at Dock Sud to thus increase competitiveness, which was the only option open to us in the face of a domestic market that was closed, since the mass importation had been authorized of tax-free second-hand vessels.

On March 27, 1991, the Convertibility Law magically turned our large export contracts for a series of container ships for Germany into a sentence to instant multi-million losses. In a flash, the credits taken in order to make the investment had become unpayable; with that exchange rate, it was also impossible to export. It was a disaster.

After a painful internal restructuring, bold renegotiation of debts, strategic associations and development of new, non-marine markets, we were seeking to gain time so as to make a controlled company landing that would allow us to find new posts for the biggest possible number of the hundreds of people who depended on us. Crashing wasn't an option. It would have been a bloodbath.

As we were performing that corporate juggling act, we received the request of the Argentine Navy to develop a project for the replacement of its already very obsolete fleet of general-service medium-sized ships, of the "Avisos" boat type, which although military vessels were certainly no warships.

The first papers I found in the box were precisely those involved in the exchange of notes with the Navy and the technical conceptual proposal for the type of ships that we took to it, which, following the worldwide trend, would be -in Spanish-, *Patrulleros de Alta Mar*, so that the project became known, using the initials of that name, as the PAM Project. Several years later the Navy changed its name to OPV Project, for Offshore Patrol Vessels, as if the English name were a hint of the veiled intention to bring them in from abroad.

In addition to the initial technical development which we performed for free, as was our custom when the customer was the Navy, we included aspects of design that allowed for economical construction and operation. And one distinctive feature

was that they could be built by several domestic shipyards, be they state-owned or private.

I found the original of our Intellectual Property Registration for the PAM Project under number 095993 of the year 1996, which I had personally applied for, and the notes from the Navy which, being enthusiastic about the project, asked us for our help in negotiating for it with the Economy Ministry.

A communication from the Ministry asked us for a report that demonstrated the Internal Rate of Return and Payback Period of the investment in those ships. It was an unheard-of requirement, the admirals had told us, and they were ready to abandon the project, explaining, "A military investment doesn't generate funds of its own for its repayment. That's not how the logic of Defense operates, but it seems that these are the criteria under the new Argentine economy.

It then occurred to us that, since one of the tasks of these PAM ships was to combat illegal fisheries, we might calculate the economic effect of this patrolling in favor of the nation's legal fishing business. So, we consulted with a group of fishery economists and experts from the National Fisheries Research Institute (INIDEP) with whom we developed a "Model of the Economic Impact of Offshore Patrolling on the Fisheries Economy". After several simulations to verify its proper operation, we submitted it to the government. In the box, I even found a copy of the mathematical model on a diskette and printout of the presentation folder, with the note confirming it had been received by the Economy Ministry's front desk, plus another letter in which we were invited to a project evaluation meeting.

To our surprise, the technicians at the Economy Ministry were very satisfied and even exhibited enthusiasm over the possibility of generating more economic resources from fisheries thanks to patrolling. The Navy officers who some months earlier had felt like giving up on the project, were now happy again.

Another notification from Economy told us that the initiative had been approved in principle, but that it wouldn't go ahead with final approval until we presented it with a formal offer of 100% financing of the investment with a grace period of several years and at low interest rates. In one of the letters found in that "mother

lode” constituted by the box, the Navy attempted to demonstrate to Economy the irrationality of the request that was being made to a crisis-struck middle-sized private company, the SANYM shipyard, which was carrying out the entire engineering development and handling free of charge and without any governmental support, to lead ultimately to an open public tender. But there never was a reply and once again the Navy’s drive began to falter.

It was at that point that Dad and I went out to seek foreign partners for the project, which, in exchange for being the suppliers of the package of equipment that necessarily had to be imported – domestic manufacture being lacking – at competitive prices, would provide the total financing of the work. To the surprise of many, after several months of personal handlings, without the assistance of any civilian or military official, we attained it through the participation of a consortium of German corporations backed by the German development bank, the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) in Frankfurt.

We submitted the offer to the national authorities and it was endorsed before the national President by the ambassador of Germany himself.

While we were awaiting the news of the establishment of specifications for the public tender for the project, we received a call from the German embassy asking us for an urgent meeting.

From the box I pulled out and reread the translation of the *Vertraulicher Bericht* (confidential report) that we were handed when we arrived for this mysterious summons.

It turned out that their intelligence services had discovered that:

- The Argentine Minister of the Interior had halted the PAM Project to replace it with an alternative of his own that had been developed in secret and in great haste. He was ready to sign the direct purchase and importation of six offshore patrol vessels for the Argentine Coast Guard (*Prefectura Naval Argentina*, PNA). The provider was a French shipyard and the price was much higher than the PAM proposal for domestic

construction, to be allocated through a public tender with long-term German financing.

- This was to be the final part of a larger strategy that would end up consolidating the immense fisheries business in Argentine offshore waters, both legal and illegal.

- At this own law firm, this minister had for years been representing the interests of the many legal foreign fishing companies and apparently was also doing so in a more indirect manner for those that operated furtively in the Argentine sea.

- Upon taking over as Minister of the Interior, he had caused an underling of his at his law firm to be appointed as national Deputy Secretary for Fisheries, from which post he appeared to have obtained unthinkable benefits for his clients, awarding them all manner of reimbursements, fishing licenses and the lifting of taxes for the massive importation of secondhand ships, destroying the local shipbuilding industry. This deputy secretary had to abruptly leave the scene in the midst of a huge corruption scandal known as the “squid case”.

- The minister had made another strategic move. He had shifted the Coast Guard from being a dependency of Defense to one of his own Ministry. Thus, the circle seemed to close perfectly, since the Coast Guard which he now commanded was the entity that controlled the activities of his own clients, both the legal and the illegal companies, but all of them plundering the Argentine sea without the slightest oversight.

- If the PAM Project moved ahead, this macabre perfect setup would have been laid bare by the patrolling activity against illegal fisheries carried out by the Navy. The only thing standing in the way of his plan was the PAM Project, for which reason the minister set up a parallel one under which the Coast Guard which he controlled would immediately be provided with imported patrol vessels, which, in passing, would generate a new and

quick opportunity for him in obtaining extra commissions from the French shipyard.

As I reread this report, there in my father's office, I could recall that moment as if I were living through it again, and could almost hear Father again saying, "Mr. Ambassador, there is only one way to halt this. It must come out on the front pages of the main newspapers. Urgently. And it is necessary for you yourself to lead this accusation."

A few days later, on Monday, April 13, 1998, it was the main headline news on the front page of the *La Nación* newspaper, with photos and statements of the German ambassador not only making an expose of the case but commending the virtuous and crystalline domestic proposal which had been awaiting a response for months. That front page, which I was holding in my hands again, also showed a photograph of the Interior Minister flatly denying everything related to the unmasked improper purchase from a French firm, even as his own underlings and the top officials of the PNA, some lines below, confirmed it in full detail.

In that article, *La Nación* compared the two projects in this manner:

The PAM project exists since 1996 and consists in the allocation to domestic shipyards, by public tender, of the construction of 15 units with 100% German bank financing, with no down payment, 2 years of grace for beginning the repayment and a total cancellation period of 10 years. Adding the taxes generated by this construction work and the positive economic impact of the reduction in illegal fisheries, the repayment of the project with self-generated funds is very fast.

The new project of the Ministry of the Interior envisioned the total construction at a French shipyard of six patrol vessels, more expensive, allocated in a direct manner, without a tender, and with a 30% cash payment, with no grace period and the rest over only 5 years.

Although already somewhat yellowed by the passing years, I also found the *La Nación* editorial of that same day in which it delved into the issue under the suggestive headline, "Fisheries control: Something smells bad."

The scandal and the proofs were so overwhelming that the Interior Ministry had to call off that scandalous direct purchase from France for the PNA, yet it operated skillfully to prevent the PAM Project from moving ahead so that the personal business dealings and the depredation could move ahead jointly and with no overs

The box continued to offer documents with the KFW German bank's repetitions of the offer to succeeding governments and multiple letters to legislators and ministers stressing that the need for those ships was ever greater, as was their domestic construction. The responses and statements of support also packed a number of files, but there was no significant official news on the project until 2010. It was then that, thanks to a whistleblower, the courts investigated the report of a fraudulent purchase of the foreign design for an offshore patrol vessel carried out in 2006. More than three million euros were paid out by Argentina in vein, since the design was never used. Because of this, both civilian and military officials were convicted in Argentine and foreign courts.

Years later, a Uruguayan Navy officer, who knew the details of the affair, also confirmed it to me. He explained that the original idea had been for this projected offshore patrol vessel to be standard for the countries of southern South America, but Argentine corruption had been so voracious that the Uruguayan Navy had immediately abandoned the project.

After that there was radio silence about the PAM Project, until February 2016.

—Martha, I've found out that Raulito is continuing to put my papers in Arenales in order. And I see he has also sent the letter just as I wanted. Despite the Celestial Rules on Unilateral Communications (CERUC), things are moving ahead; Claudia, Raulito's wife, was right, texts seek and find their own paths to reach their destination.

Manuel Belgrano

That night there was to be an eclipse of the Earth and three planets more, a rare event even from our privileged perspective on the cosmos. As Martha had invited her friends from the Lenguas Vivas institute to watch the phenomenon from our celestial terrace, I organized an evening meeting that I had left pending for several days already.

It was dark and beginning to rain on the forest path where we had set the meeting. I keep being surprised by the variety of places we have on hand up here, be they woods, seas, rivers, cities, planets, whatever we need or wish for, appears right there at our full and eternal disposal thanks to the Rule of Elective Celestial Landscapes (RUECL).

As I move forward, I hear the step of military boots hastening to catch up with me. Turning around, I make out the figure of General Manuel Belgrano, who silently makes a gesture to me to follow him. We go into the woods and he points to a military tent into which he invites me. A soldier serves me from a jar of sweetened hot coffee which I'm happy to accept.

—To the brim; thanks — I tell the soldier — It's because I've had this obsessive-compulsive "full cup" disorder since my childhood as an orphan and my times as a naval cadet. I used to say to myself, "One must grasp any chance to eat. One never knows when the opportunity will present itself again."

—Esteemed engineer — Belgrano says to me —, here I have some lines for sending to the current government authorities and I would like to verify that they're in accordance with the direly pressing naval situation you have detailed for us. Above all, I wish them to serve as inspiration for the recovery of the industrious nation we should never have lost.

—Of course. I'll be delighted to give you my opinion-but I'm certain it won't be necessary.

—Allow me to read it to you, then — Belgrano says as he brings the candleholder closer and lights another candle to see better:

To the most excellent Executive Government of The Provinces.

Their Excellencies the Ministers of Industries, Transport, Fisheries, Navy, Coast Guard and other areas pertaining to the maritime and inland waterway activities of the Viceroyalty or Nation.

Through a new engineer friend, with whom I share a patriotic devotion to the nation's maritime interests, I have with much pain taken cognizance of several unacceptable situations in these Provinces: the disappearance of our Merchant Marine, the incomprehensible mass inflow of imported old vessels for transport and fishing and in addition, in recent times, public servants' treasonous preference for acquiring military, research, tug and patrol vessels abroad, bypassing our own, capable and needy people.

Sirs, recalling my own words at the time of the struggle for Independence, I tell you that now, too, "*my blood boileth, when noting so much hindrance.*" I will allow myself to share some of my own experiences which, although it might be said that they are no longer valid in view of their antiquity, will, I hope, at least serve you as inspiration for recreating that essential domestic industrial capability, which I can proudly tell you I help to strengthen more than two hundred years ago.

In 1794 I took charge of the Royal Consulate of Buenos Aires, from which I promoted the development of the Merchant Marine fostering the founding of the Nautical School in order to have our own officers on board the vessels of our maritime and inland waterway trade and thus begin to break with foreign dependence. In short order, with the same aim, it also behooved us to promote the greater development of naval construction and there I discovered the bountiful natural and human resources of the vice-royalty that was beginning to dream of Independence.

In the first Report in 1796, I remember having stressed *“the need to populate the land with trees as that would facilitate shipbuilding.”* And the following year I wrote that: *“With the cultivation of flax and hemp our vessels shall have better and less costly rigging and ropes. In truth, these are already the last missing items for totally local shipbuilding, since we have wood in abundance and pitch minerals in Salta, Mendoza and Sierra de la Ventana.”* I proudly recall that, in 1806, on the occasion of the end of course at the Nautical School, and with our shipyards in full activity, I said: *“We see that our ships arrive in Europe to become the admiration of foreign lands by virtue of their exquisite wood and elegant construction.”* In that period, Félix de Azara explained to me that *“our wood, more compact than that of Europe, caused our vessels to last up to three times more than foreign ones.”*

With regard to fisheries, I wrote then that *“the high economic value and the creation of employment are generated by this art of navigation and also by the manufacture of its argosies.”* I referred to both activities. Not to one to the detriment of the other, as appears to be nowadays the result of the sector’s policies.

The traitorous decisions on the recent import of ships from France and Israel, for maritime and river patrolling, has reminded me of the need I experienced in 1801 of leading the Commission on Corsairs, appointed by the Consulate in accordance with a Royal Ordinance of 1797.

Owing to the lack of cooperation from the Navy with regard to smuggling, the protection of fisheries and commerce in the hands of French, Portuguese, English and United States pirates, I decided to build warships at domestic shipyards and man them with cadets from the Nautical School. In those ships, of heroic performance in actions for the protection of our waters, not only did the courage of the seamen do battle but so did the

technology and ability in the design and construction of the vessels of our people at the shipyards.

I am stirred when I recall the day of setting sail and raising the flag of the new ship:

On the 28th of March of 1801, the Consulate's vessel was anchored off Buenos Aires. That day, everything gleamed especially; its equipment had been renewed: sails, cordage, belaying lines. Pilots, sailors, gunners and the grenadiers who constituted its military garrison lined up in formation on deck, impeccably outfitted in their corresponding uniforms, proud of their ship.

At the appointed hour, several launches brought the member of the Consulate, who were to head a singular ceremony, to the ship. Pipes sounded, issuing orders unknown to the ordinary folk on land. Everything was put in place. The Prior and the secretary of the Consulate each made a speech rallying the patriotic fervor of the crew charged with the defense of its commerce.

A solemn silence fell when the halyard at the tip of the gaff raised the magnificent merchant banner of the River Plate, accompanied by the corresponding piping. As it reached the top, the river's quiet was riven by the roar of the cannon shot with which the ensign was affirmed. All the crew and guests burst into shouts of joy and hurrahs.

Bitterly have I noted that in these beloved lands something very different now takes place. I compare that patriotic event in March 1801 with that of the 10th of December of 2019 when the national flag was raised on the *ARA Bouchard* patrol vessel. This occurred in an unfamiliar French port, to the glee of thankful French shipyard workers embracing unfaithful officers of the Argentine Navy, and even happier French businessmen, who after many years managed to get rid of an offshore patrol vessel that was obsolete and so badly designed that not even the Navy of France itself, or that of any other country, wanted to take it.

Two hundred years ago, the achievements of our industry faced foreign interests and outraged a Europe and United States that desired to keep us dependent on them. But ours were necessary advances, because by building our own ships we built our own nation.

Ministers and Navy officers,

Building a ship, an industry, a nation, aren't easy tasks. I know it from personal experience. And they are not for the weak or cowardly, for which reason, if you believe to be in either of these categories, I ask you, I demand of you, that you leave your posts, as I demanded of my soldiers before each battle.

In the face of difficult situations in my time, I used to say to my countrymen, *"All difficulties would be speedily overcome if there were a measure of interest in the fatherland."* When you are criticized saying that this task of building the nation is impossible, remember the words of a patriot, my friend General José de San Martín when, being in the Cuyo region, he was criticized in Buenos Aires when he asked for support for freeing Chile with the Army of the Andes. They refused the necessary assistance saying that the mission was impossible, to which San Martín unhesitantly replied, *"It may be impossible, but it is indispensable."*

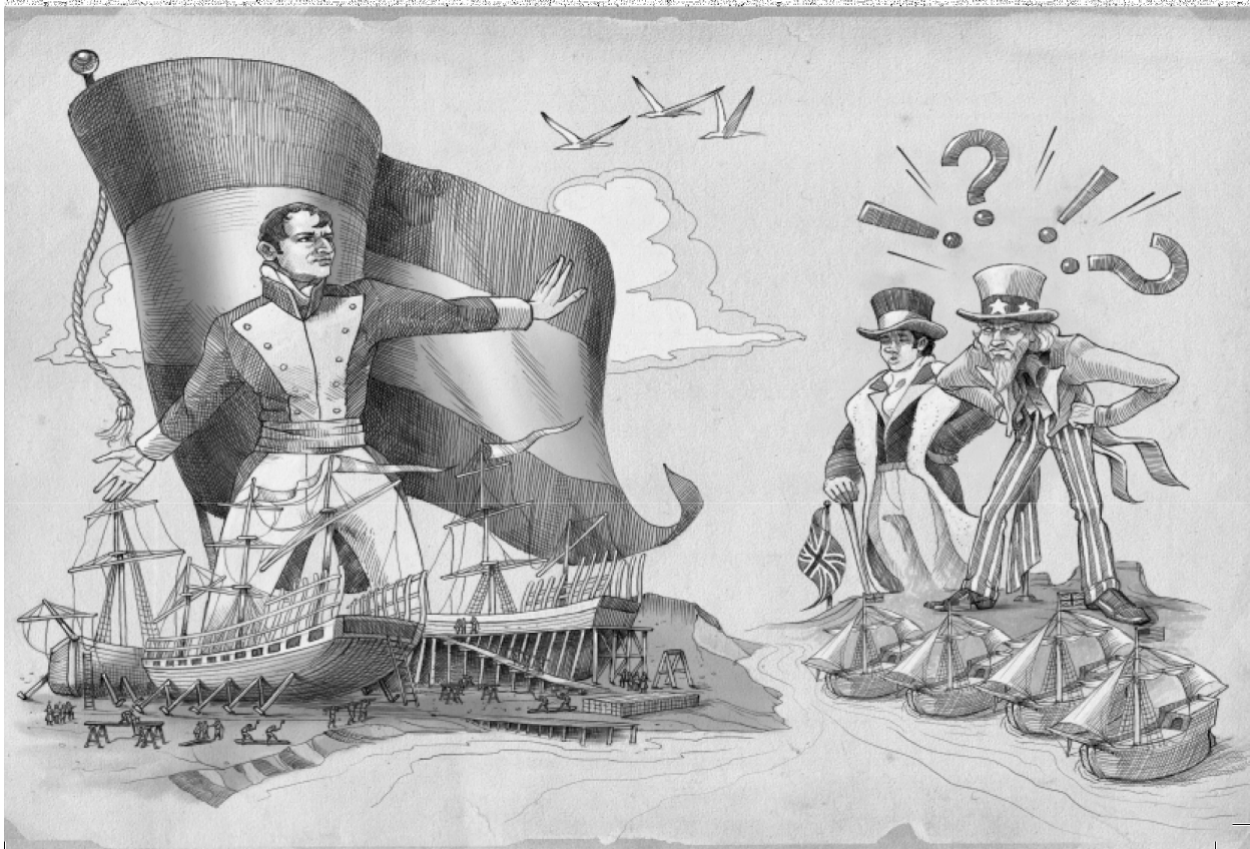
Your excellencies, I have seen many sons of the fatherland give up their lives to achieve the Independence which in light of the news received I see again imperiled. Without asking you for the patriotic extreme of giving your lives for the fatherland like many of your ancestors, I hope in God that you will at least bear all this very much in mind.

Because technologies, ideologies and markets evolve, but the basic principles and the values needed for building a nation are eternal, like the colors of our flag. Long live the Fatherland!

May God protect you for many years.

Manuel Belgrano

PS: An image from the period, found in my campaign chest, may help to illustrate the spirit of my words and thoughts in the above regard.



—What do you think, my esteemed engineer? Do you find it appropriate? Is it in the right tone? I attempted not to be too lengthy and to hide my ire as best I could in the face of such treasonous acts.

—Absolutely inspiring — I answered, thrilled, downing my last sip of coffee. — It couldn't have been more precise and emphatic.

—Much obliged. I shall dispatch it immediately with the first courier available. And let's remain in touch; I have faith in you.

May the Virgin be with you, Podetti.

Outside the tent he surprised me with an unending goodbye embrace in which I felt hugged by the Fatherland itself.

I hadn't walked long before I came across Benja, whom I asked to approach the general's tent and propose that the use of the messenger be replaced by one of his more modern methods. Without hesitation he told me he had already set up a Facebook page for Belgrano and would begin to upload these posts there.

—It's incredible — Benja said — the number of people who are already joining as friends of the general. Although they know the page is obviously fake, it doesn't matter. It has been proven that these things work this way: the important thing is to send inspiring messages that start creating a space and remain in people's collective thinking.

Sofía sends me a little message letting me know that my letter to *La Nación* titled *ARA Bouchard* has already been published. That's on March 10, 2020, and I have sent it only a couple of days before.

—How glad Addy would have felt! — Sofi says to me, calling Dad the way she had rechristened him when she was very tiny to shorten the overlong "Granddaddy —. And Marthita, with a mixture of pride and at the same time of worry, would have said: "Stop playing with fire because you're going to get burned. Those people can be very dangerous".

Sofi misses them as much or more than I.

Emails started coming in early, both in support and in criticism of my letter; many comments were left in the newspaper's own portal, filling the chat with messages. Additionally, I received several phone calls. Some condemned me because I showed up the previous government over the illegal purchase and others because I criticized the new government's Defense Minister. Which proved that "doing-what-needs-to-be-done" only assures you of blame from all sides. The important thing

was that the issue was being talked about, and that something which it had been attempted to hide was being brought to light, which was very good.

Among the calls received, one was especially surprising.

—Good day. May I speak with Raúl Podetti? — an unknown woman's voice asked me.

—Yes, hello, that's me — I replied — How do you do? Whom am I speaking to?"

—How do you do. We're calling you from the Private Secretary's Office of the nation's Defense Minister. The minister would like to speak to you.

—To me?

—Yes, to you, if it were possible. It's with regard to the letter published today."

—Ah, of course! Yes, naturally, I imagine it. Perfect, I'm available to talk now if that's all right."

—No, the minister would like to do so in person, in his government office.

—Very well, then. When would the meeting take place?

—If it were possible, this coming Monday, March 16, at 5 p.m., he'll be expecting you on the 12th floor of the Libertador General San Martin building, the ministry's site.

—Yes, of course, I'm scheduling it. I'll be there. Thank you very much.

—Many thanks to you.

L’Affaire Malaisienne

Applying the Rule of Elective Celestial Landscapes (RUECL), I chose the bar I favored for its galactic view and because they knew how to make and serve coffee the way I like it.

As I stirred my *capuccino* poured up to the brim, I began to feel nervous. I didn’t know if it was because I was unaccustomed or out of fear that Martha might arrive suddenly and find me in a compromising situation which I had definitely not sought. For a long while now, from the darkest part of the bar, an attractive young miss with oriental features was looking persistently at me while pretending to read a small book. To put an end to this peculiar situation, I took my attaché case and went to the restroom. When I returned to my table, I discovered that she was no longer there. I must confess that this created in me a strange mixture of relief and disappointment.

I hadn’t yet emerged from that ambiguous feeling when, and with no prior introduction, she appeared behind me to then sit down in the empty chair. Holding out her hand to greet me formally, she looked straight at me and said:

—миний нэр Atlatuya Shaaribuu —which, in Mongolian, means “My name is Atlatuya Shaaribuu.”

Now, closer up and in a better light, I thought I recognized her.

She too formed part of that mysterious group of young people who had spied on our naval meeting a few days earlier. I noticed that she had some strange markings on her neck, which she tried to disguise with her hair. Out of chivalry, I kept my eyes from dwelling on those obvious marks of ill-treatment.

I can’t say that I felt attracted by such a different style of beauty, but her regard had an unusual intensity that caused me a hypnotic feeling which I had to make an effort not to fall into.

—How do you do, Miss... Atlatuya? Am I saying it right?

She nodded and said, “*Saya perlu bercakap*” (I need to talk, in Malayan).

—Of course, miss. Would you like something to drink? —I replied without fully understanding why she switched from speaking in Mongolian to expressing herself in Malayan.

—Just water, thanks— she answered as the waiter brought up her little bottle of carbonated water from her original table.

—I’m going to tell you something I’ve lived through. I think you may find it very useful.

I was born in Mongolia and died in Malaysia because I was the translator of the contract between the Malaysian Navy and government, on one hand, and on the other, the French state-owned shipyard, which I heard you talking about the other day.

in 2002, Malaysia bought three submarines from the French shipyard – two new ones of the *Scorpène* class and a secondhand one of the *Agosta* class – for 1.2 billion dollars, including some 150 million euros in bribes.

The majority of the latter were collected as ‘coordination’ services by a company created a few months before in the name of the wife of a partner of the Defense Minister ,who later was the Malaysian Prime Minister. They always got together with a character with a fidgety cane from the French shipyard, and after the meetings, at which I acted as translator, they would invite me to drink champagne with them. — Atlatuya made a pause to take a sip, but immediately took up the tale again.

—As soon as the first references to corruption began to appear in the media, they decided to cut certain ‘loose ends’ and I, clearly, was one of them because I knew all the details. That’s how, in 2006, I was kidnapped and then murdered by a couple of officers in the Malaysian secret service who were the minister’s bodyguards. Fortunately, the judicial investigation that followed sentences my kidnappers to death.

She stopped for another sip of water and continued.

—In 2009 the French newspaper *Libération* published the case, causing an uproar, and the new Malaysian government intensified its interest in clarifying the events, disclosing 133 documents that incriminated the shipyard.

In 2017 and 2018, the investigation formally advanced in France and Malaysia with a media exposure with a worldwide echo, involving the French shipyard ever deeper, even while, incredibly, in the same period it was named as its preferred choice by the Argentine Navy without taking any of this into account.

—What you're telling me is ghastly — I managed to say at last —. But how was all this discovered, and the connection with your kidnapping?

—That was something incredible, my friend *Jurutera* — that being a Malayan word that translates as “engineer” —. It so happens that my kidnapping took place at an address to which I had been called allegedly for some translation work. I had arrived in a taxi which I asked to wait to as to continue the ride later. Minutes later, when he saw me leave with two other men and get into a car which wasn't his, the angry taxi driver took note of the license number and went immediately to file a report with the police to demand his missing payment. And that's how this investigation started. The claim for a few, but fairly earned, Malaysian ringgit brought to light many millions of unfairly transacted euros steeped in blood. Mine.

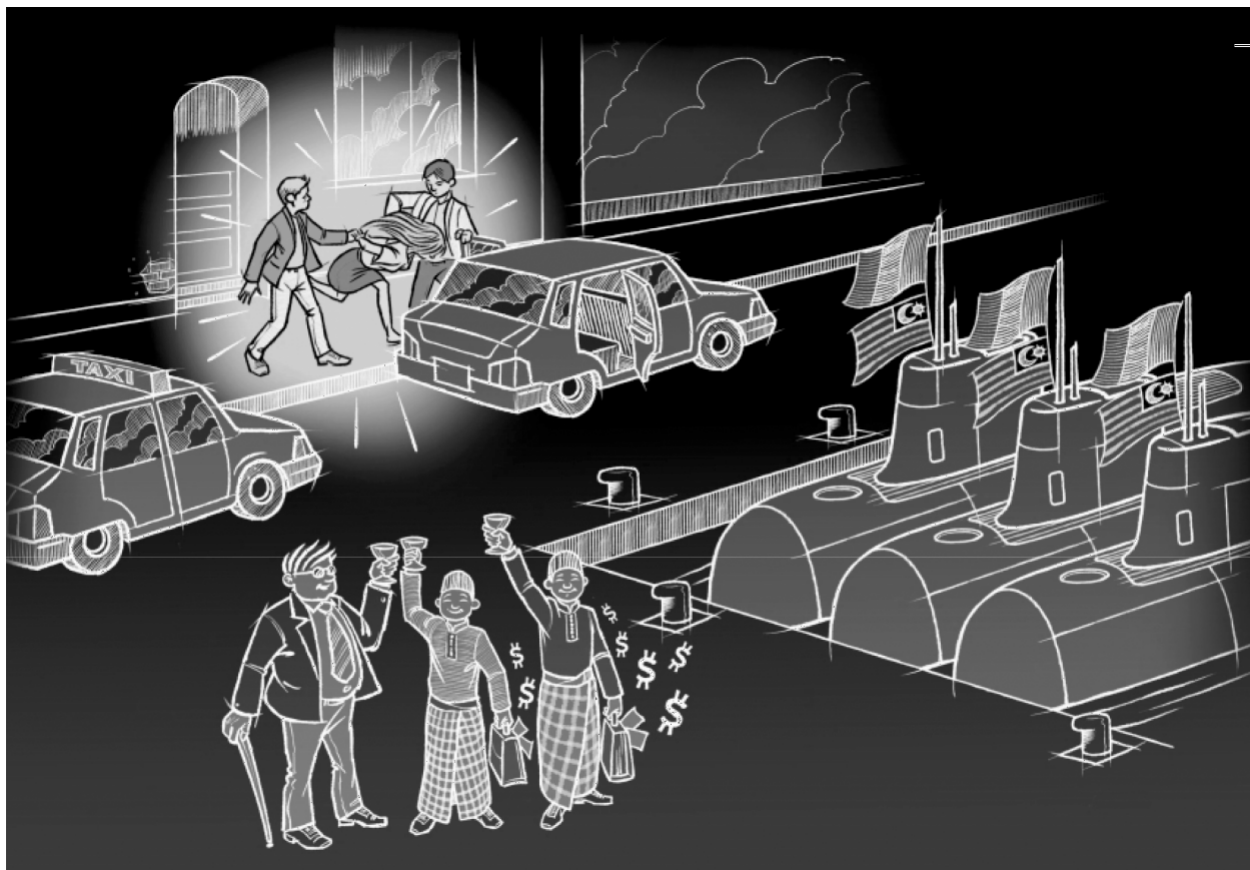
—It's remarkable, how true it is that's no such thing as a perfect crime —. I put in — It can take a long or short time, but one mustn't lose hope that the real machination will be unveiled in the most unexpected way.

—That's precisely the message of hope I wanted to transmit to you regarding your case in Argentina. Patience and not giving up in the battle I see you're waging and for which I thank you, for the people in your country who need the jobs and for us who need to have them stop killing us in order to do business.

There's my taxi, and this time I don't want to make it wait — she said with an ironic expression, looking through the window as she got up and gave me a friendly hug.

—*Selamat tinggal!* — (a Malaysian goodbye) she still managed to shout as she ran quickly to the car.

I opened my case and took out a sheet of thick black paperboard, the white pencil and the little gadget which I used to sharpen not only the pencil but my thoughts. When I was satisfied with the point and the ideas, I set about illustrating the situation which had been so vividly narrated and which I naturally titled *L'Affaire Malaisienne*.



When I got back, I was about to tell Martha about the encounter with the murdered young lady, but she got in ahead of me with the news that Raulito's letter had been published and that there had already been several repercussions. In particular she told me about the call from the Defense Ministry summoning Raúl to

the minister's office. In her tone there was a mix of thrill and worry. Martha walked around and talked without a stop.

—That's wonderful, that they've published the letter! But... why would they call him in to that ministry? Could he be in any danger? Couldn't it have been taking a risk, writing that? If there are so many interests and shady deals involved with those ships, wouldn't it be better to shut up and turn a blind eye like everybody else? Is taking such a risk worthwhile? I don't know, I'm uneasy.

—Martha, dear, Raúl is a big chap and knows how to take care of himself. What could happen to him? — was my rather unskillful attempt to set her mind at ease, while I hid the drawing on *L'Affaire Malaisienne* that I held in my hand. I was thankful I hadn't mentioned that meeting to her. Because, contrary to my own words, I was beginning to think that the risk could be real and that, in view of the interests involved, Martha had real reasons to worry.

I couldn't avoid relating the tragic outcomes of the *affaires* I had been told about in those days with the role that Raulito was taking on in our case.

Juan D. Perón

I was enjoying a privileged panoramic view of the Earth from the highest peak of a splendid mountain five minutes from home, and thinking how I could warn Raúl of the risks, when I was startled by an unexpected sound. Turning around, I discovered it was an annoying poodle, barking ridiculously. Behind it, and with resolute steps, President Perón, a sheet of paper in his hand.

—Podetti, I've finished the letter for the Companion President —. he said to me as he ordered his poodle, which ceaselessly jumped up at our side, "Sit! Canela, sit!"

Canela obeyed him and additionally didn't bark for quite a while, which greatly pleased Perón, who with his customary good humor repeated one of his celebrated phrases, applying it to the people responsible for the country's marine policy: "*The more I get to know humans, the more I love my dogs.*"

—Would you like to read the letter?" he asked.

—Delighted, it'll be an honor— I answered, taking the sheet of paper the general was offering. —Or, actually, would you do me the favor of reading it out yourself, since my eyesight isn't what is used to be?

—Of course! In that case, the honor will be entirely mine— said Perón, who always liked to have the last word; and he began to read.

To the President of the Argentine Republic.

Companion Alberto,

Before all else, I want to congratulate you for your helping us to again attain our victory, although I must admit that, in view of the situation, I don't envy you at all. We'll be getting to some ideas I've had for our administration. On this occasion I want to speak to you in particular about

your role as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces because of serious concern over the naval purchases from France which were made by the previous president, but which you receive and pay for.

As I've been told here by a companion engineer, in whom I have total trust, we could be building those ships at domestic shipyards, generating jobs and development. I also know that in recent years something similar happened with some river patrol boats for the Coast Guard and some fisheries research vessels.

Of course, unemployment and indebtedness rise! I'm not talking of shutting ourselves off from the world, but neither should we be such fools as to go out to buy what we can make ourselves. It's much easier to buy than to build, but the former makes us ever more dependent. Building requires stewardship and placing greater trust in our own capabilities as a nation, but it's what it behooves us to do. As is my wont, I'm going to tell you an anecdote that is to the point and that exemplifies my position on these matters.

In late 1973, my friend, General Fatigatti, the government-appointed controller of the YPF state owned oil company, brought me a contract to sign for the purchase in the U.S. of the two biggest and most modern oil tanker ships that would be added to our national fleet. Everything had already been agreed on, including the financing. As I noticed a certain haste in finishing the "procedure" I returned to the question I had already asked him some weeks earlier:

—Fatigatti, couldn't those ships be designed and built at the AFNE shipyard, which we founded twenty years ago? I remember it was conceived for enormous ships.

—Impossible, — he answered — We've already considered it and it has been ruled out. The U.S. proposal is undoubtedly the best choice. And besides, we should hurry, because after it's signed, the Americans are going to help us with other matters on the international agenda.

—I see — I continued and my suspicions aroused even more. — And yet, I'd like to talk the matter over directly with the heads of the shipyard. Have them see me as soon as possible.

The next day, in come Captain Carranza, president of AFNE, and Podetti, a young marine engineer, head of project for SIPIN, a mixed governmental and private marine engineering association led by AFNE and SANYM.

Right off the bat I asked them:

—Can these large oil tankers be designed and built in the country?

Without the shadow of a doubt, they answered almost in unison:

—We've never before made such large and sophisticated ships, but have no doubt that we can make them. There is talent, resources and proud desire. It's for precisely this that the nation had been investing so much to develop a domestic shipbuilding industry.

I don't know if it was the words or the gaze, full of self-assurance and patriotism, of these two young men that infused me with the necessary confidence.

I took a couple of days to make sure of U.S. support in those other matter on the diplomatic agenda that we required, and announced that the ships would be entirely made in Argentina. I died a few months afterwards, but the project was already set in motion and from here I followed its amazing and successful development. How I would have liked to be present at the launching to see the champagne bottle break on the bow!

Companion Alberto, I'm sending you an image that illustrates the anecdote and hope that this will serve you to trust in Argentines and avoid the treasonous voices that prefer the importation of ships that can be built in our country. Don't allow yourself to be fooled and be on your guard against some white caps that believe that their personal preferences – or business dealings – can be put above what is best for the Argentine people.

Another thing. Tell your Defense people to watch what they're doing at Tandamor. They shouldn't go about "fishing in the fishbowl." They're shameless if with such a large shipyard and all the governmental apparatus at their back they start to compete in the minimal market segment that's still open to the smaller private shipyards! I've heard that Tandamor wants to repair and build fishing vessels and some small tugs, competing disloyally with the private industry which is what keeps it afloat with its taxes. It's madness. Instead of that, it should aim for the 5,000 large ships that pass in front of the port of Buenos Aires and that only Tandamor can repair. Of course, that takes more work. Please!

Alberto, two last things. Watch out because the same seaman who set up the horseplay with the offshore patrol vessels is in charge of the polar ship project at Tandamor. And again, at INIDEP they're readying a fraud with another ship like the one in the previous scandal, which we started in 2014. They even have, as an advisor, the representative of the Spanish fraudulent shipyard for which, once again, the entire deal is being set up. They can't put the wolf in charge of guarding the sheep. The whole thing is getting to be too gross and people aren't fools.

You're there to fix things, not to make them worse.

A big embrace, companion.

J. Domingo Perón



— Raúl, you think this is all right?”

— More than clear— I replied

— I think the decision about the YPF ships was the last important one I took as president. And to a great extent, I owe it to you.

—Thank you very much, sir— I answered Perón, touched by the memory.

— In the end, the oil tankers that were built were two in number, right?

—Yes, President, the *Huergo* and *Silveyra*, of 60,000 tons and 240m in length. Up to now they're the largest ships entirely designed and built in the country.

—That's great, engineer! So, tell me, how did things go with that Astillero Río Santiago (ARS)? I remember it was the biggest in the region and had a lot of people and capacity. Is it still working well? — queried Perón, who had been its founder.

—The truth is, no.

With the global crisis in the 1980s, all over the world there was a reconversion of the large, state-owned, overmanned and deficit-producing shipyards like ARS. Many were privatized and others simply minimized their permanent personnel, flexibilizing their capacity according to real demand, so as to avoid having the government absorb gigantic operating losses, which are ultimately paid for by the citizenry. Following this system, in the late 1980s the fixed cost of ARS began to shrink, but in 1994, when it was switched from the federal orbit to that of the province of Buenos Aires, an unending decadence began. Starting in 1995, the new governor generated a stronghold of rising union power there, giving the union the entire management of the shipyard, which tripled its payroll while drastically reducing its output, becoming minimal at the present time, but with close to 3,000 permanent employees. For the last three decades, the gigantic losses have continued to accumulate, but nobody dares call things by their name. And even less to carry out a thorough reorganization to stop it from being a *zombie yard*, which is how the Chinese call this type of infeasible state-run shipyards, which they, if they aren't structurally competitive, abandon without the slightest qualms.

ARS is already a unique case in the world. Its productivity is 13 times worse than that of the other state-owned shipyards in our region. With its current fixed expenditure, in order to be balanced it should annually deliver at least four ships like the one it has been building for Venezuela for 16 years. So far this century, its losses are greater than the added value of all the ships built by the other 24 medium-sized and large shipyards in all of Argentina's history. Over the course of all this century it never had real support from its owner (the provincial State), which limits itself exclusively to paying the wages of 3,000 people every month. It's a huge drain on government resources. Many people already regard it as a Marine Welfare Plan and no more.

—But is there any solution? — Perón asked, markedly worried.

—Of course. There are valuable people and there is experience. ARS must be made to recover and become productive again, improving its competitiveness, but that can't be done under the current course. One would have to do almost the opposite of what has been done over the last thirty years. Cases like this, with

multi-million losses kept up for decades, are at the root of the ruination of the provincial economy and people can't take it any longer. It's been too many years. As I was told some time ago by a young fellow at the shipyard, "The day people find out how much we cost them, they'll slit our throats".

—"When the people exhaust their patience, their chastisement roars", I used to say in my speeches — Perón added, — and I see it applies very well to the peril that's being run with so much bad handling we've been carrying out for too long. It's really very serious.

I see I wasn't wrong when I told Benja to use something quite aggressive for getting Alberto to receive these messages. Knowing me, he proposed a truly military strategy which I love. He's going to create an army of trolls, which are something like computer soldiers, who will attack ceaselessly in ways that are mysterious and unimaginable for terrestrial beings, until they influence those who write the daily reports read by the president. The same trolls will also simultaneously advance on all the headquarters of the Patria Institute, Callao Group, Argentine Agenda and even the Sofía Group. Because if there's one thing I've learned, is that for important things one must never trust one sole organization, and least of all if it's Peronist, Ja, Ja! — Perón declared.

He would surely have continued speaking another while, but Canela seemed to be hungry so the general pulled something from his pocket and fed into his little dog's mouth. Seeing it eat, he remarked:

—Podetti, this business of having those ships built in France, Finland, Spain or Israel reminded me of phrase I used to say in such situations, "*He who gives bread to someone else's dog, loses the bread and loses the dog*".

After we said goodbye, I remained thinking how right that last phrase of his was: the opportunities for development (the bread), wasted in feeding foreign industries (others' dog), cause us to miss those chances for growth, destroying our industry (the dog of one's own).

I had to sit down for a moment to catch my breath. My heart was beating fast (excitement? a feeling of peril? the climb up the stairs?) outside the door to the Defense Minister's office that afternoon of Monday, March 16, on the 12th story of the Libertador General San Martin building. I felt that something important might happen at that meeting he had summoned, as a reaction to my public criticism of his words, in the government's name, upon the arrival of *ARA Bouchard*.

Perhaps as a shield, I had brought along our book on the shipbuilding industry, with a dedication to the minister, and an extra copy for whoever he decided. I then remembered, smilingly, that thanks to not having at the last moment obeyed that recommendation of Dad's, that of sending the book "first thing tomorrow morning," I now had the chance to make a more effective delivery.

On the dot, I was admitted to the office where I was received by the deputy minister, apologizing that the minister had received an urgent summons from Government House, but that he was very interested in our having this conversation.

I handed him the book, and on running through its pages he asked his secretary to call the new president and vice-president of Tandanor, the largest state-owned shipyard run by the ministry, to have them join the meeting.

While they were coming, he explained that they were totally in disagreement with the illegal purchase of those patrol ships from France, ships which should have been built in Argentina as I said in my letter to *La Nación* and in many other forums. But that, officially, the minister couldn't come out against such a sizable contract with France because other diplomatic aspects were involved.

Having imagined that an argument of that kind might be posed, I had come prepared to insist that, at least, a statement should be made and an internal investigation launched to give the responsible parties a dishonorable discharge from the Navy. That would set an example for the rest of the Navy personnel and would avoid having those unfaithful military officials continue to use their position of power to cause us so much damage.

As I began to introduce this matter, the other invited parties arrived and the conversation shifted its focus, concentrating on the State's industrial role in this activity.

Here I discovered this new administration's political intention to provide Tandanor with extraordinary government support to attempt to concentrate the country's shipbuilding industry development there, in an almost hegemonic manner. I didn't hesitate to state my disagreement with this vision, to my mind wrong, antiquated, statist, and demonstrating utter ignorance of the realities of the country's shipbuilding industry and of its capabilities. Hoping to be proven wrong, I forecast that it would have very few chances of real success, although I admitted it was a very good tactic for scripting a narrative of alleged development. Unfortunately, my fears ended up being confirmed in the years that followed.

The conversation was long and enjoyable, and before taking my leave I finished submitting my idea regarding the need for an investigation and dishonorable discharge of the naval officers in charge of the case of the offshore patrol vessels (OPV).

Several months later I found out that the responsible parties not only hadn't been punished, but had been rewarded with a very high administrative position at the same Tandanor shipyard, to push forward with the project for a polar ship for the Navy. But instead of calling the country's many marine and Antarctic experts to analyze the many most convenient options, just as in the OPV case, the business had been exclusively oriented towards benefiting a foreign corporation, in this case a Finnish one, whose true interest is to have that ship built in its own country, and to which a seven-digit figure has already been sent as an advance. The same *modus operandi* was being followed as with the OPV, which had already demonstrated being fatally effective and for which, logically, the same responsible parties had been brought in to carry it out.

On hearing about this, I immediately called the president of that state-owned shipyard, whom I had met at the ministry, and clearly stated my serious concern, to which he replied that I was wrong and that that wasn't his real intention.

At that point I recalled my uncle quoting the saying, "*If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck.*"

L’Affaire Taiwanaise

Along the road running alongside a fast-flowing river in Heaven, I see a young man walking, with an Oriental appearance and wearing a military uniform. He soon approaches me very determinedly on the quay where I hoped to devote myself to fishing for a while, enjoying the spectacle of the magnificent waterfalls which randomly changed the direction of the water’s flow: instead of moving down, it moved up, constituting one of Heaven’s supernatural marvels – and put me in mind of the beauty of the Iguazú falls, one of our Earth’s seven natural wonders. When he reached my side, I saw that the young officer was completely drenched, sneezing and in a very poor state.

—我们可以谈谈吗？ — he asked me in colloquial Mandarin, meaning, “Can we talk?”

—Of course, but first dry yourself a bit and let’s share a cup of tea which will do you a lot of good, — I replied, handing him a towel and pulling out the thermos flask I carried in my bag along with the fishhooks. Only then did I identify him as another member of that group that had been watching us some days previously.

A bit drier and cheered by the hot tea, he got ready to tell me his story.

—I’m Yin Chong-fen and up until December 9 of 1993 I was the chief auditor of the Taiwanese Navy’s Department of Naval Purchases. I was murdered and thrown into the river the day after I submitted the auditing report detailing the irregularities in the operation with the six *Lafayette*-class frigates that my government bought from the French shipyard we heard about the other day.

In 1991, France won the 2.8 billion dollars contract because it offered superior technical specifications to that of the other bidders and included a major role for our Taiwanese shipbuilding industry, which was great news for me, since I have friends at shipyards and they always spread to me that special pride that shipbuilders have.

But once the contract was underway, and for no apparent reason, it was decided that the entire works would be carried out in France, and that certain key technical aspects that spelled the difference with other bids, would no longer be demanded. My auditing report simply demonstrated these evident contractual inconsistencies.

—Very similar to what happened with the negotiation for our patrol vessels— I chimed in.

—Exactly, — he said between two sneezes — That's why I thought I should tell you and at the same time give you hope that with time these matters may come to be proven. See what happened later: although some previous investigations had been made, it was the new government of Taiwan, as of 2000, which promoted an anti-corruption drive that revealed this scandal in full detail.

In 2002 it was announced that the former prime minister and high-ranking Navy officers had changed the contractual conditions to favor the French shipyard in exchange for bribes topping 500 million dollars, as publicly admitted by the former Foreign Relations Minister of France himself, who was sentenced in May of that same year.

In 2008 it was additionally proven that part of the bribes had flowed back to France in the form of retro-commissions to finance politics.

Finally, in 2010, the International Court of Arbitration sentenced France to pay damages for 630 million dollars equivalent to the bribes confirmed up to that point plus the corresponding interest.

Even my own auditing colleague was sentenced for receiving bribes directly from the representative of the French firm, who escaped from France without his whereabouts ever being known despite having his Swiss accounts embargoed for 730 million dollars.

—Tell me, Yin, how did you obtain such precise data?

—There are several international investigative institutions on these matters, which must surely already be gathering information on your cases of the river patrol boats for the PNA and the OPV for the Navy.

The Taiwanese case is very clearly explained in the book *Armes de Corruption Massive*. I've brought a copy for you, although before you read, you'll have to wait for it dry a bit.

—Thanks, Yin, — I said as he rose to leave, — and watch that cold.

As he walked away, sneezing, I thought of baiting my fishhooks to continue with my fishing plan, but when I opened the bag I saw the block of black paperboard, my inspiring sharpener and a new white pencil that Martha must surely have placed among my things. With a fisherman's patience, I readied my drawing implements and only when everything was sharp did I begin to illustrate the disturbing narrative: *L'Affaire Taiwanaise*.



Rather satisfied with the drawing, I got ready to fish for a while and regretted not being ready to read the book, which Yin had just given me, on my own. I decided to take flowers home to convince Martha to read it to me without protesting too much, but quickly rejected the idea in order not to fill her with more worries about the subject.

In addition, I had to think how to get his book soon to Raulito – I had to find some way.

Segundo Storni

Availing herself of the beautiful afternoon, Martha had gone for a jaunt on Saturn, and I went to do some rowing as I had used to do in my early days as a cadet at the Military Naval School on the quiet Santiago River. After a spell of placid rowing, I saw with a certain worry that a sailing boat was approaching fast and on a collision course. A few meters away from me it tacked and remained in position beside my flimsy canoe, just without touching it.

Only then did I recognize the skillful helmsman from Tucumán province, Vice-Admiral Segundo Storni who, with a half-smile, proposed that we go to shore for a chat under the celestial shadow of a weeping willow.

—What an honor and pleasant surprise, admiral, — I greeted him as we made fast our boats next to the leafy tree and sat in its shade, ready to enjoy a quiet sailing conversation.

—Thank you, sir, — he replied in the manner of seamen — I was in rather a hurry to talk to you. The fact is that I was very upset by the details you provided me the other day and that show the complete loss of its course by our dear Navy with regard to the true direction of Argentine interests in the sea. I had heard something, but after our conversation I checked your information and the situation is indeed very serious, and perhaps even worse than you pointed out.

—I imagine how painful it must be for you, who were the promoter of that vision of bringing together the diverse parts of naval power, among which you always stressed ship construction, ever since your famous conference in 1916, published in the *La Prensa* newspaper.

—Certainly, it saddens me deeply — Storni answered — but, maintaining the constructive spirit which I see we share, the fruit of our shared military naval training, I've moved ahead with what we agreed on. I have here a letter to send to

my current brothers in arms which I would like to discuss with you, and ask you for your opinion of that young man Benjamín, who looks so scruffy. Can he be trusted to assist in delivering the message?

—Sir, if you'd like, I will myself have a meeting with Benja and make sure that the delivery method is the most suitable one.

—Most kind. I'll read you the letter.

To the Director of the Military Naval School

I had been thinking of writing to you for some time and the news of some events of increasing seriousness have prompted me to do so without further delay.

After some consideration I decided to write this letter to you and not to the Chief of Staff of the Navy because I believe, with concern, that the principal source of the problem I perceive lies, probably, in the training itself of our officers.

I am not fixing the blame on you personally, although neither do I exempt you from responsibility, but I would like you to consider the following matters and to act in consequence with the maximum energy as deserved by the situation.

After the turbulent years of the Military Junta, the Navy, along the other military services, suffered discredit vis-à-vis society in general. But at a political level, that social punishment took the form of a marked abandonment and lack of interest in military issues. This was reflected, for decades, in the reduction of the budget and in the lack of a strategic vision for the reconversion of the Navy.

As you know, successful modern navies have mutated from being simply large populations, with middling training and average equipment, to smaller, highly qualified corps with technologically advanced resources. Nothing further from the current state of our

beloved naval force, which on the basis of its alarming level of obsolescence has climbed the podium of the most backward ones on the continent.

In addition, those modern navies recognize as a strategic component the support of their domestic naval industries and technologies, as I already envisioned in my address in 1916.

Fifty years (an eternity) have passed since Argentina updated its fleet and it is now beginning to do so in the worst way, duplicitously bypassing the local industry which is its natural support in the essential harmonious growth towards a modern naval power.

The direct and illegal purchase from France of offshore patrol vessels is highly questionable, since for years now they should have been built in the country, as is done in Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Brazil. And to this, a similar maneuver with a Finnish shipyard is now being added for an Antarctic ship! What has happened over these years? The Navy had a starring role in the development of shipbuilding industry since the domestic construction of the *Parker*-class minesweepers in 1936, the creation of the marine engineering degree program at the University of Buenos Aires, of the State Maritime Shipyards and Factories (AFNE, 1953) and of the Buenos Aires Technological Institute (ITBA, 1958), as well as the contracting of more than 47 military vessels from domestic shipyards up to 1980.

Why has the Navy changed from a normal and virtuous role of promoter of the industry, to the incomprehensible and treasonable role of principal detractor?

There already were indications of this behavior in 2006 with the fraudulent, multi-million purchase abroad of an offshore patrol vessel design that was never used. Nevertheless, it was as of 2016 that the worst of cases was unleashed, with the inexplicable purchase of the

fleet of vessels from France in violation of the law and of the unarguable reality of our capability and the need to build them in the country. That's when the opportunity was lost to regenerate a virtuous relationship between the Navy and the Argentine people, through the industry.

I would like to mention a thought in my second conference on naval policy in *La Prensa*. On referring to the true concept of naval power, I said:

"...A customary mistake is the exaggeration of optimism when a warship is purchased. One must not lose sight of the fact that this meets a defensive need of the moment and doesn't contribute except in a weak and indirect way to strengthen the real foundations of naval power. In actual fact, the effort is reduced to these terms: that of furnishing with a national crew (which is no minor matter) a powerful machine which makes us trust in peace, but the mechanisms of which are, almost all of them, exotic.

By this I mean, and I say it in particular to my fellows in arms, that the purchase of war materials must not make us forget even for a moment that only mechanical industries, our own merchant marine, seagoing populations and fisheries will make it possible to satisfactorily solve the problems of the future..."

Esteemed Director, in view of what has taken place in recent times I make bold to ask you to review the education we are providing our cadets. Attitudes as perverse as those experienced of late and the lack of a reaction from within the Navy itself, must be rooted in very deep-reaching education problems. Lastly, I share with you this reflection and image that repeats itself with increasing strength in my most recent nightmares:

It is a known fact that some type of conflict always exists.

Even if it is not of the armed type, it takes other forms like those of a political, social, or developmental nature. And it is here that I am concerned over the attitude exhibited by our Navy in the recent naval purchases, among the largest in our history, from France.

If, in the grave social and developmental conflict now being experienced by the country, the Navy clearly aligns itself with French interests, in opposition to Argentine ones for which it exhibits maximum contempt, what would happen if faced with another type of conflict, for example armed? Which way would Argentine Navy cannons point? Why would it be different in such a case from the situation today?



This, to my mind, is much more serious than the problem of corruption that is additionally seen in this case.

Sir, before signing off I need to make two requests of you. One is of a personal nature and in the name of other seamen with whom I have met today, Hipólito Bouchard, Luis Piedrabuena and Bartolomé Cordero.

In their name and in my own we wish to request that the Argentine Navy not use our names to christen the OPV fraudulently bought from the French shipyard. We consider it a personal affront and a betrayal of our ideals, far removed from the mean interests which prompted this decision opposed to the high values of the national naval force. We charge that this improper use of our names is a maneuver to hide the treason committed against the Argentine people which the Navy is supposed to defend.

My last request is that my message not be interpreted as aimed against the Navy as an institution, which I could never refer to in harsh terms. But I undoubtedly refer with maximum harshness to the disloyal officers in charge of the OPV project and, as I am given to understand, some who are already retired and continue to exercise the same underhandedness at governmental naval corporations, favoring a Finnish company with the polar vessel deal and again the same French firm in attempts to buy submarines.

The Navy must immediately get rid of these bad comrades or will end up being complicit in these new betrayals.

Yours faithfully,

Segundo Storni

Armes de Corruption Massive

In late March 2022, aware of my interest in the subject, Sofía, who now lived in Madrid, left me a message telling me that the fourth patrol vessel built in France for the Navy would soon be delivered. I read the message, called her and said:

—Sofi, thanks for sending me this news. Do you remember that two years ago, you let me know that my letter to *La Nación* on the arrival of the first of these ships had been published?

—True. What a coincidence! — she replied with her habitual good disposition and always showing she was happy to have a chat — Although it isn't that great a coincidence, since it's a rather recurrent issue with you, ja, ja!. I always remember that Addy and you spent all day talking about it. A pair of bores.

We continued the chat for a while, telling each other things, without it mattering too much what they were, but so as to have the conversation continue and thus hear her a while longer. Just as when I went to the Arenales apartment and the old-timers wanted me to talk on and on with them, I thought, and it cheered my soul that I could revive such a nice memory with my daughter, my marvelous daughter.

The news given me by Sofi about the arrival of that last ship reminded me that, in December 2017, when Dad and I finished the book, we had broken the subject of the offshore patrol vessels for the Navy into two parts, the "PAM Project" which stretched from 1994 to 2010, and what we called the "OPV case," as of 2016. With regard to the latter case, I was closer to the events because Dad was already further removed from public action, albeit maintaining his same enviable combative spirit.

Our view of that happened through the end of 2017 is in that book, but without the defining final stage, after its publication. Nor did it include the contemplation

that distance from events allows us in order to see their concatenation more clearly.

I now asked myself: with the delivery of this last vessel, had the moment come to tell the full story with a better-rounded view? But to what end? Would anyone care to know? Should I regard the matter as being over and forget it? How could it be that such an important matter be “pensioned off,” just like that? How was it possible that the loss of a chance for national development not be analyzed thoroughly?

As a minimum, it ought to serve for there to be fewer chances in the future of these things happening again and so easily. Why should I have to carry this burden? Why shouldn't I?

I was mulling these thoughts without finding an answer. Was it for my old man? Was it for that normal course of doing the right thing, which had been pummeled into us at home by example?

I didn't know.

Amid all these questions, I found myself walking along Santa Fe Avenue. I had some free time before a meeting and decided to go into a bookstore to find something new to read.

After walking the aisles a short time, my attention was drawn to a book which was out of place from the neat array. As I straightened it, I was surprised by its title: *Armes de Corruption Massive*, by Jean Guisnel.

Could it be linked to my ruminating thoughts? Leafing through it, I discovered that it dealt, precisely, with cases linked to the French state-owned shipyard.

I began to read without noticing the passing of time; I was about to miss my programmed meeting, so I hastened to the cashier to pay. When he handed me my change, the bookstore employee informed me that the next day, right there, at 6 p.m., there would be a lecture on the book I was buying. Once back home I was able to read a lot more and the following day attempted to devour more of it in bits and pieces between meetings.

It was my intention to be there for the conference at the bookstore, but although I hastened my last required meeting of the day, I arrived almost at the very end of the presentation. Very few people were left, so I approached the speaker, who was in a rush to straighten up her many papers.

—Sorry, miss, I couldn't get here earlier but the subject interests me very much — I said, without managing to catch her attention in the least — Could you tell me where I can go deeper into the subject? — As she continued to tap her cellphone without paying me any regard, I decided to be more practical and gave her my card, saying:

—Here is my contact information, in no rush, when you can, please write to me.

With no further business in hand and seeing that the bookstore man was waiting for us to leave in order to close up, I went towards the door.

—*Mais, vous êtes l'ingénieur Podetti?* — the voice hit me in the back like a whiplash. Turning around, the woman who had spoken was looking at me in surprise with my business card in her hand.

Without awaiting my reply nor adding any kind of apology for her previous lack of interest, the lecturer hurried to catch up with me at the exit.

—*Je m'appelle Marie et j'ai besoin de vous parler*— she went on, introducing herself and stating her wish to talk to me, as she shook my hand.

—It'll be a pleasure, but it would be easier for me in Spanish or English. I've let my French become a bit *rouillé*, — I replied, remembering the Gallic term for “rusty” and pointing the path to a bar a few meters beyond the bookstore.

Marie was in her thirties, of middling height, short hair – typically French. I'd say she was a decidedly interesting person. But at first sight her main characteristic was that everything about her was in big disarray. In the few meters we covered, she had to stop three times to pick up things she was dropping, while she additionally spoke over her cellphone. I was already beginning to regret the “date” when, on entering the bar, she surprised me by saying,

—*Sincèrement, pardon et merci.* I was thinking of sending you an email to the address I found on your webpage — she was now demonstrating a perfect command of Spanish — but having met you today is like a prize.

We sat at the first available table next to a window.

— I don't know what you're referring to, Marie, but I'm sure I'll soon find out. Although not before ordering something to drink. Would a glass of champagne suit you?

—Nothing better — she said with an intriguing smile — Engineer, I don't believe in chance very much; rather, that things that are slated to happen, happen, and in the least imagined way. That's why I believe this meeting between us isn't a coincidence but the prize for a mutual job.

—Marie, if before I was a bit confused, now I am wholly so.

—How about if you start by telling me about today's lecture?

—Today's was nothing more than a fishing expedition. I was trying to attract possible leads for my research. And already back in port, with the hold empty of fish, my ship hits a shoal: *Vous!*

Noting my expression of rising confusion, Marie went on.

—Sorry, *Raoul*, maybe I should have begun differently, but I don't know if you've noticed that I'm 'a bit' scatterbrained. — She tripped over the later word, which allowed me to smile over the 'a bit' part. — I'm a freelance investigative reporter specializing in cases of international corruption relating to military matters. That's why I'm participating in the dissemination of the book I presented today, *Armes de Corruption Massive*; and I send my work to several international research institutions on the subject. One of the most important one is the Fletcher School of the U.S., which puts out the *Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption* for the World Peace Foundation.

These institutions make public the proven cases of corruption in arms matters (navy ships included, obviously), which actually are only a minimal percentage of the total corruption. The rest simply hasn't been revealed yet. What I do is help to

look into the cases that smell bad and which usually follow the same *modus operandi* as the already verified ones, yet have still to be fully uncovered.

And that's where you come in.

Yesterday, — she continued, — I arrived in Buenos Aires attracted by two local cases which have been spoken of for years in our circles: the purchase of river patrol boats from Israel for the Coast Guard and of French offshore patrol vessels for the Navy. When I began to establish the foundations of my investigation, I found that the roads led to the book that you and your father published in early 2018. When I obtained a copy and had the chance to read, I was impressed by what you say about those cases, but very especially about the second one, that of the ships bought from France despite your multiple warnings. But, in the book's contents, I also loved the illustrations, which are my weakness and always help me present these subjects which are so complex. Congratulations. — she concluded, pulling our book out of her bag and placing it on the table. — Could you sign it for me?

—It'll be a pleasure, — I said, and then, after signing and seeing the champagne arrive, I proposed a toast. — And tell me, Marie, how can I be of use to you? I don't know much more than what's already in the book, at most I could tell you some events between its publication and now that the last of those patrol ships is to arrive from France in a few days.

—*Je pense, Raoul*, that if we add your knowledge of the facts and some capabilities that I can contribute, we could do a good job in getting this case known by society and the international institutions. Because, to the extent that more people know this, the greater chances there are that leaks will begin. Because there is no perfect crime. But one needs perseverance and to manage to get society involved. The best ally of corruption is concealment.

—I understand you, *Marie*, but I want to make clear what my real interest is in these cases. It isn't the same as what motivates an investigative journalist or a good prosecutor, who smell out the shady deals or bribes and go out to find the 'money trail' and other such spectacular stuff. And I'm not saying there's no

economic corruption in these cases, but what really motivates me, what makes my blood boil and pierces my soul is another form for corruption, which steals the jobs and the future of Argentines. My pain is more closely related to treason. I can't accept that our own countrymen – civilians and military personnel – take advantage of their position of power to rob us of our job opportunities and to mortgage our future and that of our children. Of course, if in addition they improperly fill their pockets, it's even worse.

Without noticing it, my voice was beginning to break.

—It stirs me too, — Marie put in, coming to my rescue, — and that spirit is transmitted in the work you wrote with your father. As you say, corruption has the most varied faces. That of bribes to buyers, that of the partial return of commissions used for the political ends of the selling governments, that of murders to cover them up, and also, in many cases like this, the robbing of opportunities from their own people, as you point out so rightly and passionately.

But as well as having various forms, military corruption is also of colossal size. Sam Perlo-Freeman, a famous international investigator into the subject, estimates that 40% of all worldwide corruption involves cases like these. Among the reasons he points out: the high value being negotiated, which tempts officials; the alleged reasons of national security that allow the hiding of information which is fundamental for detecting the irregularities; the parliamentary and judicial controls which are often too lax; the powerful seller governments that protect the buyer in the face of an investigation, and lastly, in addition, this is one of the preferred forms for political financing.

In the Argentine case it's very easy for military corruption to find a comfortable nest. Transparency International's section on Defense periodically publishes the worldwide Military Corruption Index; there, Argentina's greatest weakness is concentrated in the area of military and security purchases, which is where those ships come in, both for the Coast Guard and the Navy. The lapidary report on Argentina indicates an extremely low level of real congressional control, and the non-existence of rules and laws for preventing and for investigating acts of

corruption with an international scope, as in the case of the purchases from Israel and France. In addition, the OECD itself determined that Argentina has for year deliberately failed to comply with the Anti-Bribery Convention, and that there are no serious signs of an interest in investigating cases of corruption with an international reach.

—Thank you very much, Marie. I think I now understand a bit more, but I have an appointment in a few minutes. Could we meet again tomorrow and continue the conversation?

—*Oui, bien sûr.* I think that at our next meeting we could go through the principal stages of the case of the French vessels, which according to what I've read was the biggest purchase in Argentine naval history and had quite a bit of toing and froing. If you don't mind, I'll take notes, make some questions and illustrate (it's my frustrated calling) the most important situations in the case, because when it comes to communicating, it's well known that an image is worth more than a thousand words.

As you will have read in the book I presented today, there are many *affaires* similar to this one, which involve the same French shipyard in business deals regarding naval vessels and submarines for Brazil, Malaysia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

We should find a name for this case, one that represents it well.

—*L'Affaire Argentine*— I proposed almost without realizing I was pronouncing a word. It was as when, at school, someone whispered you the answer in an oral test and one repeated it almost without thinking. But there was nobody around to do so. It was at once mysterious and agreeable.

—*C'est parfait!* Shall we meet tomorrow, right here, at ten?

L’Affaire Brésilienne

Abusing the Rule of Elective Celestial Landscapes (RUECL), I had agreed to meet Benja at a beach bar where he would be that morning and at which I loved to stop on my walks. I see him arrive with some friends, carrying his surfboard.

—Hello, Benja! — I greet him — How are things? Here I have Admiral Storni’s letter, what do you think would be the best way to get the message through? — As I pose the question, I bring out the impeccable envelope and ask myself what the admiral would think of such an informal delivery received by a pair of moist and sand-covered hands.

Realizing my apprehension, Benja pulls out a cellphone, kept in a special pocket in his neoprene suit, and asks me to spread out the letter on the table. He scans it, clicks two or three times on his cellphone and then gives it back to me. After clicking furiously for almost a further minute, he tells me:

—Ready, engineer, it’s done.

—I don’t understand. What’s done? — I ask him.

—Sending the letter. It’s already arrived. I filtered it into all the social networks of the Director of the Naval School with the instruction that on being opened it should go viral among all his contacts, and so on and on. In a few seconds the ideas in this letter have already had more dissemination than those of the admiral’s famous conferences between 1916 and now.

Plus, in a few more seconds these contents will be divided into several little messages of 280 characters using another, very effective system Benja adds, meanwhile showing me the figure of a little bird in his cellphone.

I swear on my eternal life (even though it’s the only one I have left) to hide such an indignity and abuse inflicted on the admiral’s sacred words, so as to avoid bringing his naval fury down on me.

Benja assures me that this tiny bird is very effective; if it generates many tweets, it means that the subject is of interest. I thank him for the patient effort in trying to explain all the details to me, but it's in vain.

With no further ado, he says goodbye, picks up his surfboard again and runs back to his friends.

With the satisfaction of a job done and without major obligations ahead of me I ordered a *caipirinha* and lay down on the sand to enjoy the music of Vinicius which sounded delightfully.

—*Oi! Poderia me convidar uma caipirinha?* — said a scrumptious *garota* who had been approaching until she stood next to me, and I remembered that stanza dedicated to Brazil by the *Les Luthiers* humor group – “*the walk of a gazelle, hourglass figure, velvet skin, flaxen hair*” – which the Luthier Daniel Rabinovich had sung at a celestial recital that Martha and I went to with some friends only a few days ago.

—Yes, of course — I answered to her request to be invited to a drink— Excuse me, but do we know each other?

—*Não fomos apresentados, mas o conhecia de vista,* — she replied, increasing my curiosity even further with this statement that although we hadn't been introduced, she knew me by sight. — *Meus amigos Yim e Altantuya já me contaram sobre seus encontros com você. Me nome é Márcia. Eu tenho uma história pra você* – My friends Yim and Altantuya have already told me about their meetings with you. My name is Márcia. I have a story for you.

—Of course! — That explained why she looked familiar. Márcia was part of that group concerned with the *affaires*.

Our drinks arrived promptly and she began to tell me:

—In December 2008, as part of a joint plan for the development of the defense and shipbuilding industry of Brazil, President Lula da Silva (Brazil) and President Sarkozy (France) had signed an agreement by which the French would provide us with the technology and parts for the shared production of four *Scorpène*-class

submarines, one nuclear submarine and a new *estaleiro* – shipyard – to carry out this construction and other, future ones in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

—The contract was for 6.7 billion euros.

—An association was set up between the French state-owned shipyard that you mentioned and Brazil's Odebrecht construction company, and the project began development at Bahía de Sepetiba, near Itaguaí, a beautiful place where I lived all my life.

The new shipyard was inaugurated by President Dilma Rousseff in 2013 and from that point the first submarines began to be built and delivered under an ambitious long-term plan.

In the year 2015, the famous *Lava Jato* corruption investigation reached this project. A retired admiral in charge of the naval nuclear project was arrested, and in August 2016 was sentenced to 43 years in prison. To this was added that whistleblower officials of the Odebrecht construction company charged him with 4.5 million euros in bribes.

In 2017, an Odebrecht executive testified against the representative of the French shipyard for bribes of 40 million euros to improve the French position in the arrangement.

This scandal was published in several media like *Estadão*, in Brazil, and *Le Parisien*, in France, and was also picked up worldwide. That's why it's so strange that in Argentina, at that very moment, argentinians were contracting directly with the same French shipyard as if they were unaware of anything. Even my Argentine friends called me because they had read everything in the Buenos Aires papers and knew I was working at that *estaleiro*.

—That's precisely what I wanted to ask you, Márcia. What's your relation to all this? What is it that you saw?

—*Vi tudo* – I saw everything. I was the secretary to the manager of the Itaguaí shipyard. My position was a privileged one, if you could use that word in this case. All those military, political and business characters from Brazil and France passed in front of me. I remember an executive of the French shipyard who

always arrived with champagne to make toasts with and twirled his ridiculous cane about. At first, despite the investigations, they seemed very relaxed, as if they thought they would never be caught.

I wanted to tell you this, the way my friends did. To help you and that way also my many Argentine friends, especially because I've now heard that, in addition to the patrol vessels, your new government wants to buy a fleet of submarines from the same French shipyard. You people never learn!

—Thanks. I imagine that as happened to Altantuya, they must have eliminated you for having seen too much — I ventured, following the logic of the other *affaires*.

—*Não!* — she replied laughingly and almost choking on the last of her *caipirinha* — A bit over a year ago I took sick leave because they found I had a galloping cancer that brought me here in a few months.

—That's a relief, Márcia! — I said, sincerely happy and at the same time realizing the awkwardness of my phrase.

She again laughed with all her charm and stood to give me a warm goodbye hug, running off to pick up her surfboard and join her friends who were already heading towards the waves – among whom, to my surprise, was also Benja who greeted me from a distance. After a few steps, Márcia turned around and made me the gift of a final farewell:

— *Até outro día! Vá con Deus, Raúl!* – See you some other time! Godspeed, Raúl!

As I watched them move away, I remembered some final stanzas by Les Luthiers:

E como foi o final / da historia tan colosal?

O final foi muito vil / pela culpa do Brasil.

O sol tan ardente e cruel / me queimou toda a piel.

And what was the end / Of such a colossal tale?

The end was very vile / And the fault was Brazil's.

The sun, so scorching and cruel / Burned my entire skin.

And I wondered if these tales of naval corruption would also leave us:

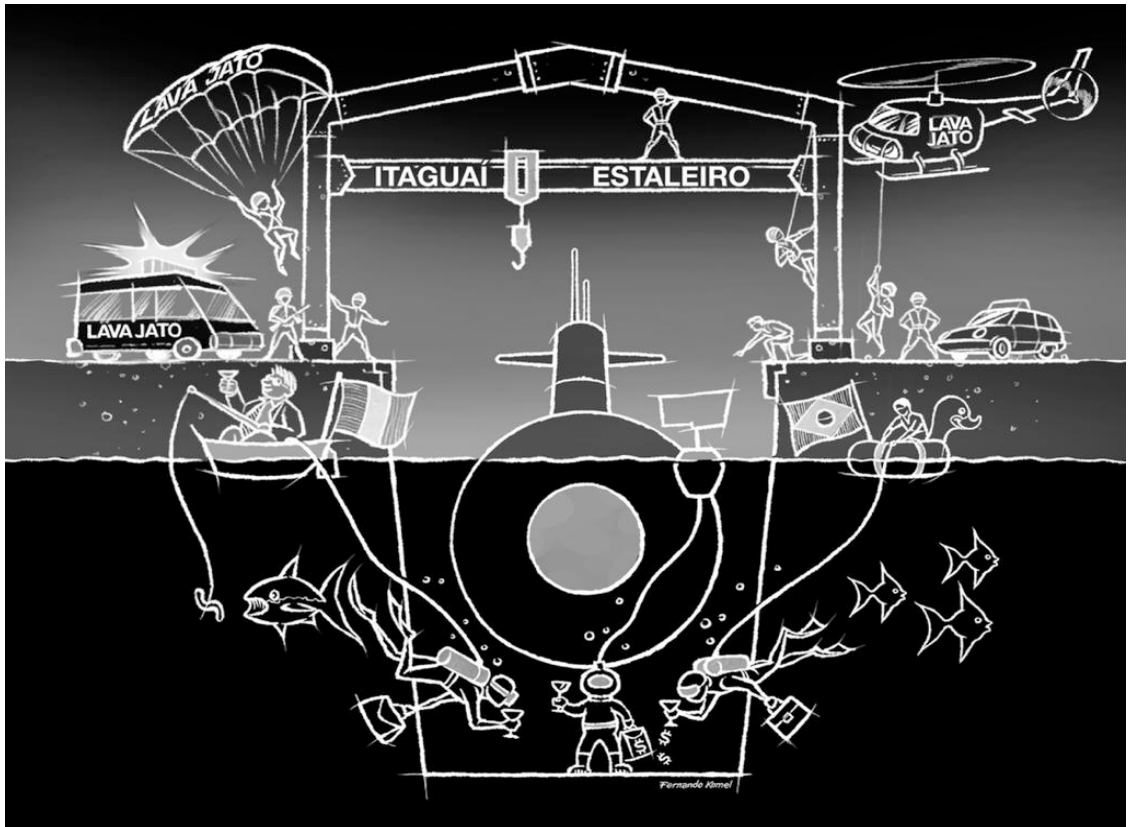
Queimados todos / de la proa hasta la popa,

Que ni siquiera desnudo / podría aguantar a ropa.

All burned / from bow to stern,

So that even naked / I couldn't stand my clothes.

To be true to character, I ordered some *bolinhos de camarão* (shrimp dumplings) and another *caipi*, and pulled my drawing equipment from my bag to illustrate Márcia's story, which I would obviously name *L'Affaire Brésilienne*.



Emilio E. Massera

On a morning of supernatural beauty, I was waiting for Martha near the corner, which I hoped (prayed) was the right one, to go shopping with her (for I-can't-really-remember-what), when I was startled by the strident squeal of a green Ford Falcon without license plates taking the corner at full speed and almost climbing onto my sidewalk. The car managed to stop almost at my feet and, through the tinted rear window, which barely lowered a few centimeters, a character with dark glasses and thick mustache looked out. Without saying a word, he placed a package in my hands to then again speed off at headlong speed, until the car vanished in a cloud, signaling an end to the operation.

I opened the package gingerly but also intrigued. Inside was an audiocassette with my name written on it on an old adhesive label. There were also two envelopes.

I looked around as if I needed to hide from something while pondering how I'd manage to listen to that mysterious cassette. As I was about to open the first envelope, I heard Martha's voice, telling me:

—Great! You remembered. And you even came to the right corner. Come on, let's hurry up, they're about to close.

On arriving at the store where Martha had to pick up a little electric stove she had left for repairs, I saw they were selling a secondhand Walkman that appeared to be in good condition. So, in a sly maneuver worthy of agent 007, I bought it without Martha noticing.

Back home, when my first chance arose, I went into the bathroom, placed the cassette in the gadget and put on the headphones. I pressed PLAY but nothing happened. Obviously, the first thing I thought was that they had pulled a fast one on me at the store, but the mystery was immediately solved.

—Raúl, it needs batteries — Martha said, opening the door a crack to hand me a blister with two batteries of the right size — When I saw you buying it secretly, I thought you'd need them for sure, so I bought them right there. I hope you enjoy your music, — she added as she closed the door.

—Thanks, Marthita. You always surprise me— I said, dropping immediately to the level of Agent Maxwell Smart.

At last, I could begin to listen. After a few seconds during which I could hear the noises of someone getting ready to tape, a very peculiar, distorted voice began to be heard, like the ones one hears in movies when someone tries to disguise a key identity:

Engineer,

Through “the (intelligence) services,” I'm aware of the meetings that have been held in recent days in relation to the Navy's purchases and want in some way to make my contribution to the noble mission you're heading. You will understand that because of certain circumstances I must do so while remaining clandestine and would thank you not to reveal my identity, but do reveal the information I'm sharing with you here and that you can handle as you see fit to make the best use of it on behalf of the higher national objectives pursued.

Within the (military Junta's) National Reorganization Process, surely the biggest project related to shipbuilding industry capabilities was one in 1977, that of the Ministro Manuel Domecq García Shipyard, in an association between the Ministry of Defense and the German corporation Thyssen Nordseewerke GmbH, in Emden.

The contract consisted in the purchase from Germany of TR1700-class submarines and parts of others to be finished at the future shipyard in Argentina, which would then manufacture them and become the most modern submarine factory in the region.

Unfortunately, for economic and political reasons, it didn't quite happen that way. The shipyard opened in 1981 and the unfavorable outcome of the Malvinas War soon afterwards plus the political events that immediately followed ended up by liquidating the project. The Germans handed us almost everything, we paid them more than fully, but we never built any submarines. The only work done were repairs, maintenance and mechanical tasks, much less demanding and far below the potential that this shipyard (renamed "Storni," a few years ago) still possesses. But those magnificent facilities are still in place, designed to work in tandem with Tandano, constituting undoubtedly the most modern and efficient national shipbuilding industry capacity in existence, but completely underutilized for decades.

As your son proposed, this would have been the perfect place for nesting the construction of the OPV flotilla, with the participation of international and local shipyards, given Tandano's inexperience as a builder. The same system could be used for the projected polar vessel, taking advantage of the experience of the domestic team that participated in the transformation of the *ARA Almirante Irizar* icebreaker, but everything indicates that the true hidden political intention is to have construction end up being done in Finland, which has already collected part of the money.

The ideal thing would be to consider, there too, some type of national integration in the construction of the next submarines that we must some time decide to build, instead of buying them from the same French shipyard as the OPV, as it has just been announced is the intention.

Please forgive my insistence with the story of the submarines that began with the country's First Junta and ended with the Last Junta. Here's the tale:

In late 1810, the U.S. citizen Samuel Daber arrived in Buenos Aires and proposed to the First Junta the construction of a submersible artifact to attack the vessels of Spain's Royal Armada stationed in Montevideo. Junta members Larrea and Azcuénaga found the proposal viable and Daber began work. In October 1811, he requested permission to shift the submersible through the water "for the purpose of carrying out certain tests," but nothing was ever heard again of Daber or the submarine.

In 1926, the government authorized the purchase of submersibles and the construction of the Workshop, Slipways and Garrisons for their repair and maintenance at the Port of Mar del Plata, which Navy Minister Manuel Domecq García inaugurated in 1928.

The mention of Domecq García, in the context of this suspicious purchase from the shipyard in France, brings to mind the outstanding participation of that naval officer at the end of the negotiation for the construction of the *ARA Sarmiento* frigate in Britain, in February 1896. Although the admiral had been an extremely tough negotiator in Argentina's favor, once the contract had been signed and complying with tradition, the British handed a large personal check to the admiral as a percentage commission on the contracted value. Domecq Garcia immediately endorsed it, returned it to the British shipyard and asked it for a receipt for what should be regarded as a first advance payment for the frigate that was being built in the name of the Argentine republic. What a difference with the current attitude of the officers involved with the OPV!

The documentation that you will find in the attached envelope is the following:

- An image illustrating the submarines project for the First Junta and another for that of the last Junta.



- Documentation on the fraudulent purchase of the foreign project for the offshore patrol vessels for which, in 2006, the nation's government paid the unprecedented sum of 3.3 million euros for a German design that was never used. There is also a copy of the proposal that you at that time submitted to the Defense Ministry for the domestic development of the same ship, including results of the trials at the Testing Canal of the University of Buenos Aires' School of Engineering that you had already personally carried out and paid for. Your domestic proposal, in much greater technical detail, cost less than a third of the foreign price.
- I include the article on page 5 of *Clarín* on April 7, 2010, shortly before my death, replicating the news in the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, which published this scandal. This ended up with the sentencing of Navy civilian and military officials on the basis of confessions before German courts by German executives likewise put on trial for participating in other acts of corruption in several countries, including ours. But the worst part of the case, and one which connects the issue of the OPV with that of the submarines, is

that the condemned German company that mediated in the sale of the costly and useless ship design for those patrol ships was the same that did so in the supply of unsuited batteries for the *ARA San Juan* submarine, which may have been one the probably causes of its deadly explosion. With regard to this, I can tell you that I'm completing a confidential dossier, which I will let you have soon. It is my hope that, just as you're doing in this case, you will head the real clearing up of such a painful case in which negligence and naval corruption again come together, but in a deadly manner.

- Lastly, as a brief advance regarding the above subject, I attach a publication by two Argentine investigators in June 2018, the central part of which I transcribe to you as follows:

The German firm that in 2006 participated in the bribes related to the purchase of the design of offshore patrol vessels for the Navy is the same that sold the servicing of the batteries, which is mentioned as one of the possible causes of the sinking of the submarine ARA San Juan. Instead of installing new batteries, for some reason which continues to be a mystery, it was decided to carry out a "plates replacement," which consists in removing materials and corrosive liquids, in place of entirely replacing the pans and internal parts. At that time, the German engineers advised against that "plates replacement" and expressed the opinion that it was better to replace them entirely, but for some reason in Argentina the decision went ahead and an intermediary was used for this service. The MD 13776/16 audit, by the National Auditing Office, detected, in addition to unjustified direct contracting operations, that the link between manufacturer and intermediary had included many other improprieties. To this day, the majority of the investigations and opinions of specialists indicate that the

accident that may have caused the sinking of the submarine could have originated in the filtering of saltwater from the snorkel that supplies air to the vessel when it is submerged at a shallow depth. That water, with physical characteristics that make it a first-class electricity conductor, could have started an electric arc that lit the hydrogen emitted by the batteries and which could have accumulated excessively precisely because of failures in the battery pans which were never properly replaced.

Lastly, engineer, I must let you know that this morning, when I was setting everything up to make this recording and send it to you, I received an unexpected visit who, without much explanation, handed me an envelope made out to me, but for me to pass on to you in an urgent manner. It's the second envelope included in my delivery to you today. I may mention that the person who handed it to me is a real "professional" whom I had under my command for a time to perform certain very delicate tasks, but who now carries out freelance operations. I don't know, nor do I wish to know, what is in that envelope, but I advise you to be careful because it's someone to be feared.

End of communiqué

I removed the headphones. I was exhausted.

I opened the first envelope and found all the papers mentioned by Admiral Zero, as he was known. The other, mysterious envelope was closed and said:

"Admiral, please deliver to Podetti, unopened. Urgent."

On opening it I was surprised to see a series of snapshots of Raulito and Marie conversing passionately in a bar and toasting with champagne. They were the kind of photos that are taken surreptitiously with a telephoto lens, from a certain distance, from outside the bar, as in spy movies. I managed to make out that there

were many papers on the table in the photo and seemed to make out the blue cover of our book.

Why was I getting these photos? What was the meaning of all this? What was it trying to tell me?

I went on rummaging in the envelope, and among the photos there was a note that said:

WE ARE WATCHING YOU.

CALL OFF THE INVESTIGATION AT ONCE.

SOLE WARNING.

My blood froze. I had to tell Raúl immediately about this warning.

But how?

That concern over Raúl's safety managed for a few instants to make me forget the distaste that had been produced by receiving this material thanks to Admiral Zero, a self-confessed corrupt person and murderer, undoubtedly one of the most infamous characters in Argentina's history, who thus attempted to be included in the group of historical leaders who were helping in this task, seeking to align himself with patriotic interests. Revolting. Nevertheless, on the other hand, thinking about it coolly, I couldn't deny that the information supplied was good and was well documented. I therefore had to make use of the data and make them known despite coming from such a nefarious character.

L'Affaire Argentine

Part I

The new meeting with Marie generated a strange feeling in me in which the adrenalin of the unexpected encounter with such an energetic young woman mixed with the emotionality of stirring up subjects which a few days earlier I had been about to give up on.

Enveloped by these feelings, I arrived at the bar at ten o'clock sharp. She had already installed herself at a large table next to one of the windows, cramming it completely with coffee cups, plates with half-eaten croissants, many papers, a laptop and some books. Among the latter, with a certain pride, I identified ours, from which several colored slips of paper emerged, like those that are pasted on the sheets.

Seeing me arrive, she hastened to make room and place most of the stuff on the chairs, leaving me some minimum available living space.

—Hello, Marie — I greeted her — I see you've started already. Great!

—*Oui, oui.* I was hardly able to sleep last night, rereading your book and other materials I had which confirm and complement your investigation. I couldn't stop thinking about this *Affaire Argentine* and came early to begin to organize our work. I've brought some first drafts of the illustrations which I think are going to help us show the stages of obstacles in this real race with clear winners and losers. — And almost without catching breath, she continued — Let's start with a couple of methodological aspects of my work. First, I need to tape our conversations to avoid taking written notes, and so be able to on my laptop with the digital pen, which is how I'm most sure of catching what's essential. *C'est bien?*

—No problem — I replied.

—Second. I must tell you that at this stage in the investigation one avoids using the real names (even if we know them) of people, whom I assign nicknames and characterize with their most outstanding features. Their presence is repeated in several of the scenes in the *affaire*. However tragic the events, it has been proven that this technique is more effective in communication because it softens the treatment of such harsh situations a bit.

I'll show you — she added, anxious for me to see her drawings — what I've assembled so far, on the basis of what I've read. I call this *Profils de Personnages*."



Monsieur Le Président:

Typical French politician, representing the top authority of the country favored in the *affaire*. Rather thin, impeccably suited and wearing the French presidential sash.



Monsieur Le Directeur:

Top-ranking executive at the government-owned French shipyard, overarching organizer of the deal in all essential aspects. Short, rather fat, with glasses, suit and cane. Is always toasting with champagne.



Maurice:

Maximum political official of the Argentine government in the *affaire*. Wears the presidential sash, the Boca Juniors soccer club jersey and sportswear, since he is the one who must really overcome the obstacles to reach the goal.



L'Amiral Michelin:

Top responsible party on the *affaire* on the Argentine Navy's part. The name responds to his physical appearance and strongly marked sympathy for anything French. Led the *Direction Général du Matériel Naval de la Marine Argentine* during the OPV deal.



Le Capitain Astérix:

Faithful subordinate to *Michelin*, he is in charge of eliminating any hurdle to the sacred mission of the French OPV. Obtains strength from the foaming magic potion handed to him by the Druid *Directeur*. He is short, vociferous and very aggressive.



Les Travailleurs Navals:

A group of healthy and well-protected French naval governmental workers demonstrating their thankfulness to their *Président*, and to his new Argentine friends *Michelin*, *Astérix* and *Maurice*.



The Naval Workers:

A group of technicians and workers at Argentine shipyards demonstrating for jobs and development opportunities for themselves and their children. They're ignored by *Maurice* and despised by *Michelin* and *Astérix*.



Madame Du Fond:

Highest international financial official. Wears a little Chanel suit and short white hair and is always surrounded by suitcases bursting with money, ready to be opened or shut according to circumstances.



Engineer Nobody:

That would be you and the nickname comes from the disparaging insult which, as I read in your book, *Le Capitain Astérix* hurled at you when you submitted your report and unveiled the details of *L’Affaire Argentine* at Government House.

—Very impressive. They’re very well typified! Congratulations, Marie! I never imagined that with a digital pen on the screen one could do such work. Excellent. I’ve also made some notes last night. If you agree, I’ll start by telling you what was the beginning of this *affaire*.

While a waiter attempted to put down some cups of coffee as best he could, I told her:

—In February 2016, a few weeks after the new national government took office, a mission from France arrived in Buenos Aires, headed by its President.

One of the most outstanding aspects of this visit was that it coincided with the arrival at the port of Buenos Aires of the French OPV *L’Adroit*, of the *Gowind* class, built beforehand at the French governmental shipyard and which, accompanied by its international executives, was making a tour of “less developed” countries (Latin America, Africa, etc.) to make sales.

In that regard, I can tell you that, three years ago, I was invited to give a lecture and coordinate the closing forum of a Marine Congress in Colombia in which the admirals and main decision-makers in military naval purchases in the region participated. The only ones absent were the representatives of the Argentine Navy's. The Latin American admirals present, experts on this kind of patrol ships, were highly surprised by the Argentine decision in favor of the French vessel. I recall a comment that faithfully encapsulates the generalized opinion:

L'Adroit, of the French *Gowind* class, is undoubtedly a poor design for a patrol vessel and is, in addition, one of the most expensive on the OPV market in relation to its features and operational capabilities. It was built in 2011 at the French governmental shipyard, with so little success that not even the French Navy itself wanted to incorporate it in its fleet. For years now, French executives have been wandering around the world trying to "convince" some navy to buy it from them.

For us it wasn't even an option to be seriously considered, given its bad design and ridiculously high cost. In addition, like the rest of the countries of the region, we decided to embark on the design and construction of our own OPV and we're doing very well. Besides obtaining excellent new ships, we save foreign currency and generate development in our own industry, importing only what we need because have yet to manufacture it ourselves. It makes us very proud.

You, in Argentina, should have done the same. You have far more history with designs, experience and capacity at your shipyards than most of us in the region have. What you're doing is incomprehensible. It shames the entire region. That's surely why there is nobody from the Argentine Navy at this Congress.

In the same sense, a few days ago, a retired Uruguayan seaman contacted me in response to an article I had written for the magazine *Puerto* on this subject. He told me he had participated in the inspection of the French *L'Adroit* in Montevideo when it was offered to the Uruguayan Navy before it arrived in Buenos Aires. The

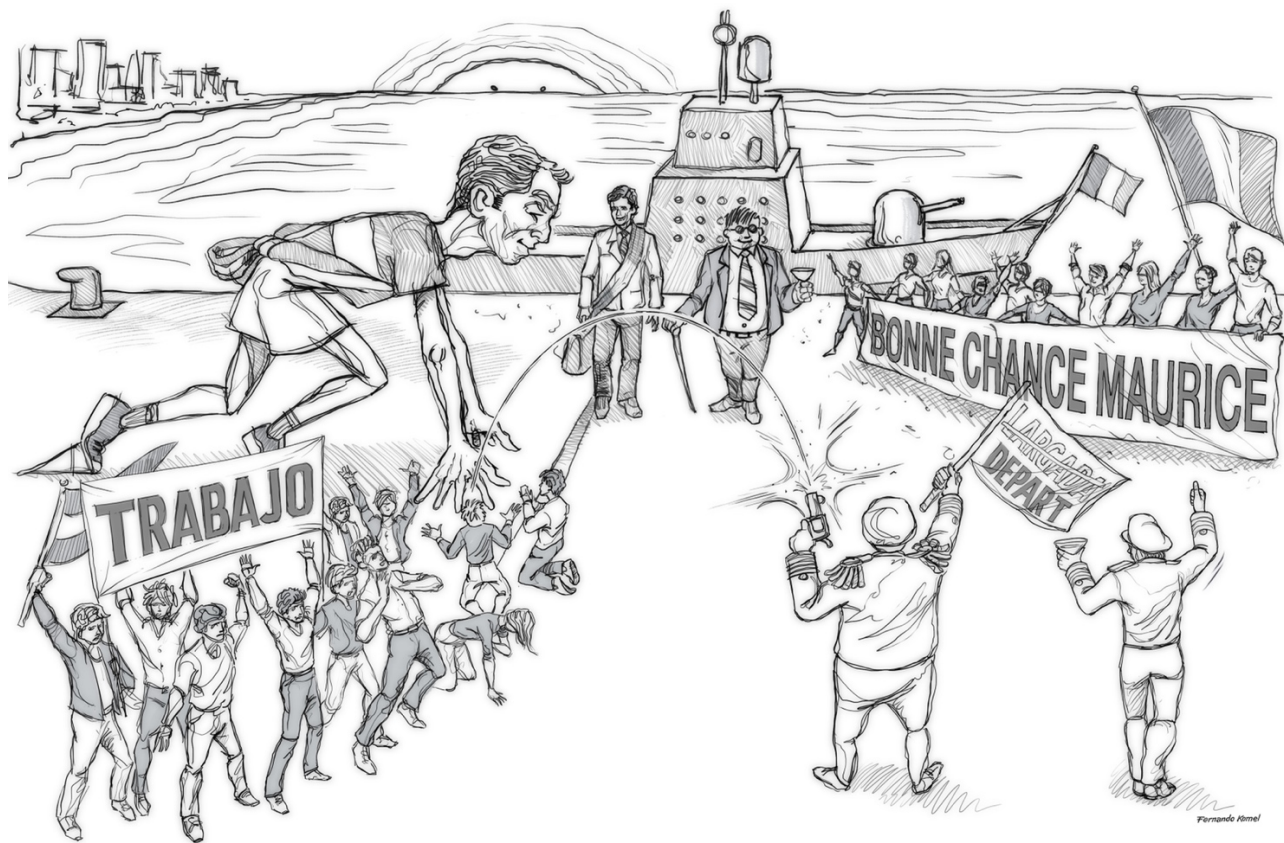
inspection report had been fulminating. In no technical or operational aspect did the French vessel outperform other alternatives and in addition its cost was ridiculously high. Speaking of Uruguay, a few weeks ago, through a friend, I sent the Uruguayan President an open letter congratulating him for having called an international tender for the purchase of a pair of OPV, avoiding the gambit of a direct purchase. Naturally I took the opportunity to encourage him to be bold and build them in Uruguay, so that it will continue to develop its industry as it has been doing for years. The letter was also published in the weekly *Búsqueda* (Search), which has a lot of prestige among Uruguayan media, and had a big repercussion.

Marie was following me attentively, although without ceasing to draw, so I went on.

—Returning to the subject of the *Affaire Argentine*, in the months following that visit by the French President, coinciding with that of the ship, a series of meetings continued very dynamically between the French maritime executives and civilian and military officials of the Argentine Navy, the Defense Ministry and its shipyard Tandanor. Obviously, there were also many others, heavily manned and lengthy, by Argentine military people and officials invited to long-lasting stays in France.

At last, in July 2016 the government received a formal proposal, for some 400 million dollars, for a very basic provision (lots of exclusions) of four patrol ships, with the provision that at least half would be built in Argentina. That, I would say, was something like the ‘starting signal’ for the *Affaire Argentine*.

—Very clear, *Raoul* — Marie said to me at the same time that she showed me an illustration she had just finished — While you were speaking, I made several changes to one of my sketches of last night and I think that it is now a better depiction of what we might call *Le Départ* (Start).



Fernando Rímel

—Very good, Marie. You’ve captured the essence of the situation and the characters are perfect. I think it shows how pathetic it is to see *L’Amiral Michelin* with his ‘Start’ banner, modified with a French translation, and giving the ‘start’ signal not with blanks but with real bullets that mortally hit Argentine shipbuilding workers – quite a symbol.

Well, and so we arrive at the meeting of October 2016, which you will already have read about in the book.

—If you don’t mind, I’d like to hear you tell it — she asked me, and so I went on.

—Seven months after that French visit, on the basis of a study I wrote about the competitiveness of the shipbuilding industry sector, I was summoned to a meeting

at the Cabinet Chief's Office at Government House to give them my view on the performance of Tandanor, the country's biggest state-owned shipyard, which was a dependency not only of the Defense Ministry but also, of that Office through a kind of Consortium of State-Owned Corporations.

At this meeting I found myself surrounded by a young and very professional team: economists, engineers, lawyers and political scientists. I was asked for details with which to thoroughly analyze the model of shipbuilding industry competitiveness.

At last, the true reason for my presence there came up. It was the point at which I was asked:

—Podetti, we would need you to help us evaluate the proposal sent by France for the construction of some patrol ships, the offshore patrol vessels (OPV). Would that be possible?

—Delighted to be of help — I said — It would also be good to get a chance to analyze the reports that both the Navy and the Defense Ministry must have of this proposal and of the many others they must be evaluating.

I then detected a certain unease and the person who seemed to be in the lead in the team said to me, in a confidential tone:

—The thing is that over these months we haven't managed to receive any formal evaluation of the proposal nor a comparison with others. From the Navy the only answer we get is that the sole possible option is the purchase of the four units France is offering. That their design and price/quality ratio are unsurpassable That's why we need a more professional and, shall we say, disinterested opinion. That's why we called you. Here's a brief on the French offer. We could meet in a week, right here.

A week later we again got together and I handed them a report with the main points which were as follows:

– The price of the French proposal is inexplicably exaggerated. A comparison with 400 cases of similar, recent vessels indicated that the

French proposal was enormously overpriced and in addition didn't take very large additional costs into account.

– The French design didn't seem technically suitable. It was a known fact that this design had been a failure on the international market and in addition didn't comply with what the Navy had specifically specified for the last twenty years, given the characteristics of its area of operation in the South Atlantic.

In that regard I made a joke to help lower the increasing tension being felt. I said then: "It might also be that in recent months the characteristics of our sea have suddenly changed and happen to coincide with this specific Gallic design."

This caused laughter among the team and helped the atmosphere to become more relaxed, which allowed me to get to the next point which was the one that, actually, I was most interested in. So, I said to them:

—These vessels can be built in our country under better conditions.

Applying to this specific case the model of shipbuilding industry competitiveness that they themselves had analyzed days before, I submitted the results of the impact on Employment, Revenue, Foreign Reserves and Total Cost if the OPV were built in the country. The comparison was so favorable that great enthusiasm was created in the team. No wonder: it made it possible to get an entire industrial sector back on its feet, to generate a very large number of quality jobs and to save hundreds of millions in foreign currency, greatly lowering the final cost.

I explained that in the region, countries with much lower industrial capabilities than ours were building this kind of vessels at their own shipyards with great success.

The questions that followed were increasingly oriented towards seeking the way to implement this new, virtuous domestic solution which, they were certain, would greatly interest and please the President, whom they were slated to report to in a few days.

At the end, before saying goodbye, I suggested holding a joint meeting with the Navy, Defense and Tandanor to analyze this report and this new alternative along

with them since they were directly interested parties. I found it uncomfortable to be speaking about this without their presence and without being able to receive inputs and exchange opinions that would, undoubtedly, enrich the solution.

A few days later we were again gathered with the team of the Cabinet Chief's Office and the top officials of the Navy's Naval Materials Office, who were handling this OPV project. I presented the report and as I went deeper into details of the advantage of domestic construction, some officers began to show discomfort and to develop an obstructionist attitude in the face of this new solution, saying:

—Domestic construction is a pipedream, which is not viable for this project.

—The Navy has never been so close to the OPV and the domestic path will be more difficult and longer. We've already decided to avoid it.

—We have already chosen the French shipyard which is the best option as regards design and price. Besides, they might build a part in the country, although it isn't a demand of ours.

—We aren't going to imperil this negotiation to consider this new, domestic alternative that's being mentioned. We're already beginning to move ahead with the drafts of the contract with the French shipyard. The decision has been taken. It's not to be messed with.

Surprised by such an obdurate attitude on the part of the Navy officers, I once again insisted they reconsider their position with regard to the country's shipbuilding industry and take a look at the regional examples which were very successful.

Suddenly the youngest and shortest officer, the one whom, in your drawings, you called *Capitaine Astérix*, and who had been markedly nervous, pounds the table, stands up and with increasing aggressiveness and in a burning tone of voice, shouts at me:

—My only responsibility is towards the Navy. My mission is to provide my service with this fleet of ships. Whichever way. As soon as possible. Argentina's industry isn't my brief.

And looking straight at me as if trying to intimidate me, he shouts at me:

—I don't understand what business you have to come here to tell us anything. We were moving ahead very well, and you've come to disrupt everything. Besides, you aren't here in representation of any interest in particular, neither businessmen, nor FINA, nor the union, nor any political party.

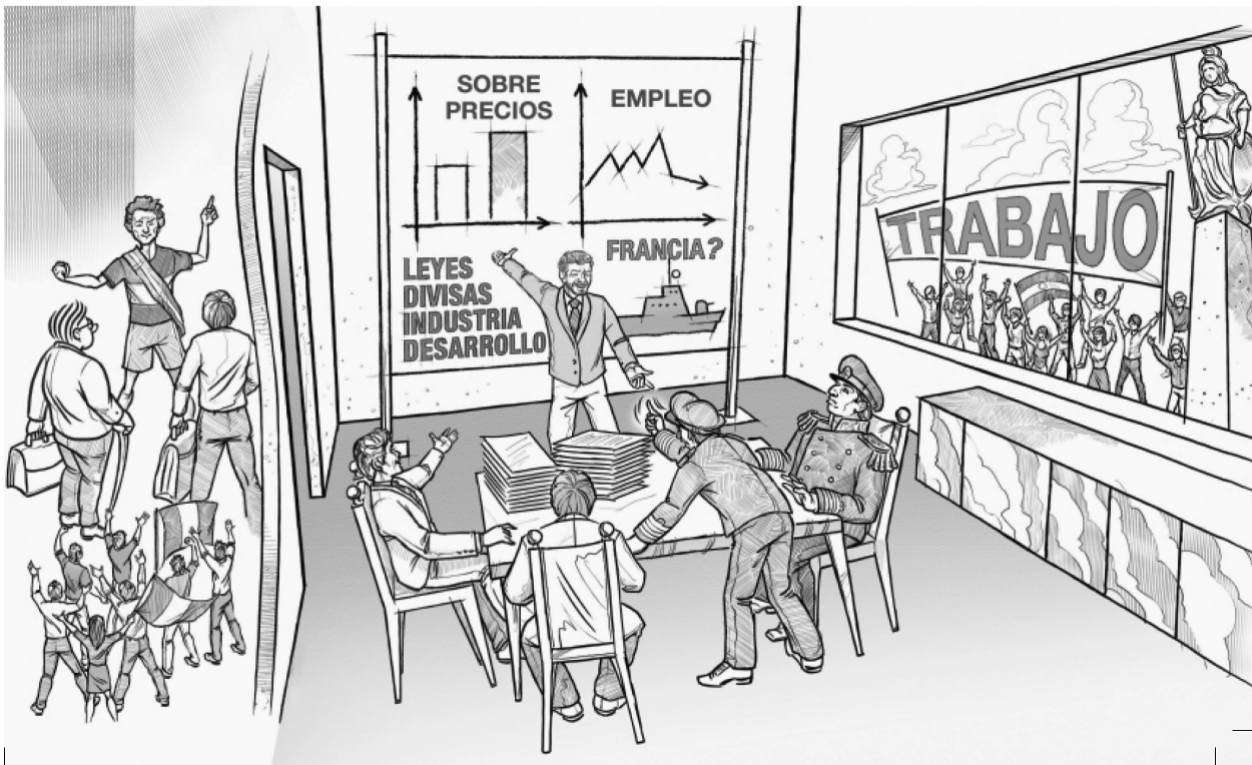
I don't get you. To me you are nobody, NOBODY, NOBODY!

He kept repeating it in an ever louder and more aggressive voice, to the surprise of everyone present, even as he was being asked to leave the room.

Immediately, an admiral came up to apologize in the name of his companion in arms. Still dazed by the situation and almost without thinking of the dual meaning of my reply, I said:

—The problem here is that Nobody defends the people.

—*Mon Dieu!* — Marie exclaimed — what an intense, and at the same time revealing moment! Even though I had read it, hearing you tell it gives me the shivers. And that all this happened right next to the President's office, makes the story much stronger. That's why I propose that we title the scene *Maison Rose* – for Government House, since it's nicknamed the Rose-Colored House.



—That's very good! You've made me look younger.

—I remember having read that you managed to speak about the matter directly with the President. Is that right? — Marie asked, raising her eyes from her laptop and taking the opportunity to sip her coffee, which must have been quite cold by then.

—That's right; I'll tell you how it happened. In the final months of 2016 and early 2017, I kept in touch with the Government House team, answering ever more specific questions, and sending them the journalistic pieces that were published ever more frequently, detailing the charges and proofs of acts of corruption involving the French shipyard in Brazil, Malaysia, Taiwan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

I halted the narrative, to tell Marie that we might also call those cases "*Les Affaires*".

—*Bien sûr. C'est parfait!* — Marie agreed.

—Surely, — I went on — it must have been the combination of these journalistic bombshells, to some extent my report, and the very tough position that France was adopting against the entry of Argentine products in the European Union, that led to the very advanced negotiation with the French shipyard being halted.

This situation prompted the appearance of other countries offering their own versions of patrol ships, with proposals arriving from the Orient and Europe, always linked to very attractive financing packages.

I can tell you that a few days ago the representative of a European marine group showed me that their offer surpassed the French one in features and cost 30% less, but that the Navy was inexplicably uninterested in listening to any other option.

—And why was there no progress with the domestic alternative? What was the problem? — Marie inquired.

—The lack of financing and of a strong and reliable domestic shipyard, — I replied. — That's where the biggest weakness of the local alternative lay. They then asked me if the issue of financing, for the Argentine option, could be solved.

So, I told them of the experience we had had at our SANYM shipyard in the late 80s and in the 90s, when the maritime industry was cut off from access to one of its principal inputs: credit. To solve that, we sought leading international shipbuilding groups that might want to associate with us and make good use of our capacity, competitiveness and engineering, as well as an impeccable record of contractual compliance. We managed, in association, to get them to provide 100% of the financing and all the imported equipment that wasn't manufactured in Argentina. That's how we built and exported tens of modern riverboats to Paraguay and container vessels to Germany.

Then the President's Office team asked me if I could achieve something like that so Argentina would obtain foreign financing for its domestic constructions.

Imagine my surprise! I had initially been invited to answer a few questions about Tandano and now I was being asked to obtain 400 million dollars in credit to build ships for the State.

Following the same logic I used at SANYM, and with the invaluable assistance of Guillermo, a friend and former colleague at IAE with solid contacts in the Dutch marine industry, in a few months we put together a bilateral agreement between the two marine industries. The Netherlands offered 100% financing, long term and at low rates, for the construction of vessels to be entirely built at Argentine shipyards. In exchange for that, they would provide the materials and equipment not produced in Argentina, under competitive conditions. As vice-president of the Federation of the Argentine Shipbuilding Industry (*Federación de la Industria Naval Argentina*, FINA), I signed the agreement in Amsterdam on March 27, 2017, in the framework of the Argentine president's visit to the Netherlands.

The day after the signing of the agreement, I was invited, as part of a small group of Dutch and Argentine businessmen, participating in the Mission and related to marine and logistical activity, to sail around the port of Rotterdam along with the Argentine President and the King and Queen of the Netherlands.

During the navigation, accompanied by the main actors in the Dutch marine industry, I presented the basis of the bilateral agreement that had just been signed, after which the President stated:

—This is very good. Congratulations, both to the Argentine businessmen and — turning to the Dutch executives, — to you, who trust our country, which is changing. We need you to join in with your investments, contributing technology to help us develop. And when is the construction of the ships beginning?

—Sir, — I replied — for that to happen, one sole issue needs to be solved: the demand. The rest is almost ready. The Argentine industry has the capacity, is competitive, and with agreements of this type would at least have a solution for the financing; but without demand, nothing of what we're doing is of any use.

—What's the problem? How can the government help? — the President asked, showing his interest.

—For more than thirty years, — I informed him — the country has been favoring the importation of ships, especially secondhand ones, which could be competitively built in the country. Argentina is known as the junkyard of world marine scrap. And in recent months, to this was added the disadvantageous importation of State vessels for INIDEP, ENARSA and the Coast Guard, and now there is the case of the Navy.

—I don't understand, — he insisted — that part about the competitiveness of our shipbuilding industry, when every month we have to subsidize the hugely deficit-ridden state-owned shipyards.

—Sir, some other time, if you wish, we can analyze the question of the state-owned shipyards, which is very different from the private shipbuilding industry, which I was mainly referring to just now. Today there remain some 17 private shipyards, spread out between Corrientes and Santa Cruz provinces, which account for 85% of the output of new constructions. The majority are very efficient and have a lot of idle capacity because the

State prevents them from working. None gets even one dollar of the subsidies you just mentioned.

Surprised, the President continued:

—I didn't know private shipyards existed in Argentina. Much less about their competitiveness. Therefore — he said with increasing enthusiasm — could we really build in Argentina, on schedule and at an international price, those patrol ships for the Navy that France is offering, and also other ships? Would we have foreign business backing and financing?

Then, looking straight at the Dutch executives, he asked them:

—You, who know the Argentine shipyards, would you do it?

In the face of enthusiastic and unanimous confirmation received from the Dutch businessmen, the President ended by committing himself to study this new scenario.

As we were ending the conversation, two tugs sailed past us that surprised the President with their modern design and exceptional maneuverability. Concerned over competitiveness in our ports, he asked us if that type of vessels could someday manage to be built in Argentina.

One of the Dutch executives and I looked at each other with a smile before replying that the year before, four ASD tugs, identical to the ones sailing past, among the most modern in the world, had been built in Buenos Aires – two of Dutch design and two with domestic engineering, but all four wholly built in Argentina, on schedule and of international price and quality.

Later, speaking to him for a moment alone, I mentioned that agreements such as the present one could also be obtained with other countries. We only needed to reach out into the world for what we don't have, rather than what we have plenty of.

—But where would the patrol ships be built in the country? How do you think it could be done? — the President asked me, frankly interested.

—Sir, call an international tender, with the condition that the ships be built in the country, providing the best technology. The international marine groups will partner with the best domestic shipyards to make their bids

competitive, also adding their financing and the equipment that we don't produce yet. Part of the Storni state-owned shipyard infrastructure, which is totally underutilized, could even be temporarily leased to them. That way we would have the global shipbuilding industry competing to bring us work, not to take it away from us.

—I like it. I'll think about it. Many thanks, Podetti.

—*Félicitations, très bon progress* — Marie exclaimed enthusiastically, and showed me the new drawing of this scene, which she titled *L'Opportunité*.



—*Merci, Marie*. I won't hide the happiness and pride I felt after that meeting. It was really a unique moment. Memorable.

—I can imagine. — she replied — When I was listening to you, I remembered the story I read in your book about the conversation your father had with President Perón to convince him to build some oil tankers in the country. I couldn't avoid associating it with this case.

—Yes, I had Dad very much in mind at those intense moments, and I know that in some way he is following this maritime saga we undertook together. It's off, but

at times I get the feeling he is trying to whisper in my ear, give me advice. Well, it must be because of so many years together, sharing dreams.

—Marie, shall we continue tomorrow, same time, same place? Now I'm running a bit late and they're expecting me at a luncheon.

—*Bien sûr. Merci beaucoup.*

Eleazar Videla

For my last naval meeting, making use of the Landscapes Rule, I had chosen a very special spot: my preferred park bench during my childhood in Villa Mercedes, San Luis, facing my beloved Pedernera School where, in addition, my mother worked. Known as “Teacher Pyrite,” she taught practically all subjects, including Nature, Chemistry and Mining, hence her nickname. That reminded me that that afternoon I would be getting together with Humberto and Ramiro, my dear brothers, to visit her at her home and taste her celestial plum cake, it needing to be said that the recipe already received that appellation in terrestrial life. In addition, many other dear relatives would be coming: Francisquito, Anacleto, Don Pancho, Chabela, Héctor, Dorita, Panchito, Pila, Teté, Norita, Estela, many Carloses and a lot of others.

There I was, sitting in the square, happy to be listening at full volume to the wonderful *cueca* tune of my land of Mercedes San Luis: *Calle Angosta, la de una vereda sola* (Narrow Street, the One With Just One Sidewalk), which filled up a lot of my time lately, thanks to the Walkman I had bought a few days earlier.

—Hello, engineer — I was greeted, with the lilt of his San Juan province, by Admiral Eleazar Videla, who was punctually arriving for our agreed meeting. I didn’t hear him, so loud was the music in the earphones, plus my singing along with it, until the admiral stood in front of me.

—Sorry, sir. It’s great to see you again — I said, removing the headphones and standing up to greet him.

—You seemed very engrossed in that *cueca* you were singing, such a product of the Cuyo region, like the two of us. However, listening to you I understand and am thankful that you devoted yourself to engineering and not to singing — he said, laughing as energetically as everything else he did.

I joined in the laughter:

—Yes, you're so very right — and once we had sat down again, I said:

—At our last meeting I didn't get a chance to tell you how I admire your drive and decisiveness to carry out the project to build the *Parker*-class minesweepers in an Argentina as convulsed at it was in 1935. They were fundamental for the launching of the country's maritime industry development.

—Thanks, Raúl. I have been thinking precisely about that since our last meeting, and it was what prompted me to prepare some ideas of what I would like to tell the disloyal naval officers of the Naval Materials Office — he explained, pulling a sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his impeccable naval greatcoat.

He was about to share his ideas with me verbally, but it crossed my mind that a recording would be the best way to pass the message on to Benjamín. So, I asked the admiral for a few seconds, placed a virgin cassette in my Walkman and pressed the record button.

After inspecting the strange contraption, Eleazar Videla began, with big military sonorousness, to narrate his point of view:

—In this business of the patrol vessels, I'm particularly worried by the manifest animosity of the Navy Materials Office with regard to our countrymen at the domestic shipyards, whom they disregard as if they were foes when the moment comes to think of projected maritime purchases. I'm especially concerned about their ignoble, superior attitude when they exhibit such marked contempt for the allegedly poor industrial performance of Argentine shipbuilders. Arrogating to themselves the undeserved role of judge and jury, they rule out, without the slightest chance of participating in competition, the natural suppliers of those ships, their own countrymen.

Without intending to enter into a bigger polemic, I would just like to issue a reflection regarding those Navy officers' right to judge the shipbuilders, in view of the actual performance of the Naval Materials Office which they allegedly manage. In recent decades, a magnificent polar vessel, at the height of its operational lifetime, ran aground and sank; they had a fire at one of the world's

most modern icebreakers; they allowed a guided missile destroyer to sink at its own naval base, and they lost a submarine off the Patagonian coast with the tragic death of its 44 crew members. And all of this in peacetime! I wouldn't want to imagine what their performance would be like in wartime.

It's hard for me to find in these comrades the least moral authority with which to be such rigid judges of their own countrymen who only want to carry on with their noble calling of designing and building ships for the Navy to crew. The latter is the way it should be. It was always thought of that way. And this handful of traitors, seeking their own benefit, are splitting the interest of the Navy from those of the country, as if they, a handful of scoundrels, stood above them. Decisions on naval purchases are of great strategic importance for the nation as a whole, not just for the Navy.

—That — I added — is how the shipbuilding industry began and grew strong in our country. And that same process continues up to today in many successful countries.

—Precisely. Buying abroad is a possible and always easier path, which at the end of the process leaves one with just a flotilla of ships but much greater indebtedness, the same unemployment, and a hindrance to domestic industrial development. But another path is also possible, although much more complex and laborious: that of domestic construction. At the end of that process one not only has the new ships but also a renovated and more competitive shipbuilding industry within a country that is proud, less indebted and in full development.

The Navy decides on the course and thus chooses to be a part either of the problem or the solution. In other words, it chooses to be in favor or against the country.

—And you are who, before anyone else, launched that complex and laborious, but at the same time much more virtuous path. Remind me of those days — I then asked him, knowing it would be an inspiring case.

—In 1934 — his voice was clear and determined — President Agustín P. Justo appointed me Navy Minister, at a time when the naval service had plunged

into a deep crisis caused by disinvestment and grave economic problems. Nevertheless, our fleet needed to be renovated. A similar situation to today's,

In spite of all odds and against many foreign and domestic interests (there always are traitors), I took the more arduous path, but which undoubtedly served the highest values of the nation and of the Navy, which at that moment were aligned. In that way we managed to contract for several units in the country, training a skilled workforce and providing it with the best and most advance technological instruments.

Thanks to that boost, the minesweepers *Bouchard*, *Drummond*, *Grandville*, *Spiro* and *Py* were successfully built at the Río Santiago Navy Base, while private industry took charge of the construction of the *Parker*, *Fournier*, *Robinson* and *Seaver*, the first two at the Sánchez shipyards and the rest at the Hansen y Puccini company, which would later turn into the great ASTARSA shipyard.

Podetti, here I'm leaving you an illustration of that period.

—Thank you, sir— I said, receiving the image that best described the patriotic attitude that linked the development of the Navy and that of our industry.



—That Parker minesweepers project — I added — generated a lot of domestic development, to the point that it's considered that this decision marked the consolidation of the Navy as the natural promoter of Argentina's modern shipbuilding industry.

—Maybe, in the same way — the admiral went on — the terrible recent purchases from France, so strongly promoted by certain Navy officers, will be regarded as the biggest betrayal of the Argentine Navy and its consolidation as an alleged internal enemy of its own countrymen.

And, after a pause, he added:

—Engineer, I've found out that the same group of disloyal officers in these OPV deals made another naval military purchase from France which, although for a lesser amount, also has scandalous aspects. It involves a squadron of four obsolete *Super Étendard* airplanes, more than 40 years old, bought for several million euros despite a French warning that they were of no further use. Nobody in the world flies those planes any longer, and Argentina has for many years had a squadron of eleven units of that type, also inoperable.

In addition, some members of that same team of officers, already retired, are pulling the strings of the new polar vessel project guiding it straight towards a shipyard in Finland, disguising it with the promise of future domestic participation, while figures in the millions are being sent abroad as advance payments. It's the same *modus operandi* as with the OPV. And no comrade denounces this, as if they were all benumbed.

I don't want to overwhelm you, engineer, but I have been also told that with the delivery of the fourth OPV, the Argentine government plans to begin negotiating with the same French shipyard for the direct purchase of a fleet of submarines that would be paid with the same resources used for the OPV, those of the FONDEF. That's the recently adopted '**Fondo para la Defensa** – Fund for Defense,' which automatically takes a percentage of the national budget to re-equip the armed forces. Since an enormous share of those funds will, for years, be used to pay for these improper purchases from the French shipyard, in naval

circles it's already known as the '**Fondo para el Desarrollo de Francia** – Fund for the Development of France'.

—That's terrible. We need to put a stop to all this to avoid the wasting of national opportunities and resources, affecting the honor of the Navy on account of a handful of crooked officers. I'll see how I can forward this news to Raúl, my son, with whom I share this challenge.

—But as you well know, the problem isn't encapsulated within the area of Defense. The fraudulent purchase from a Spanish shipyard of research vessels for INIDEP, which began to be planned in 2014, also need to be investigated, and likewise the suspicious and unnecessary imports from Israel of patrol boats for the PNA Coast Guard. I've also heard the Coast Guard is about to renew its coastal patrol ships and, as usual, is looking more abroad than in the country.

—Yes, sir, the cases of the imports for INIDEP and PNA are very evident and still remain unpunished. I'll try to notify my son to be alert with regard to the new purchases PNA is planning since it's shameful that that service should never have bought a new ship in the country, when they're the ones that the majority of domestic shipyards can build. The Coast Guard has always imported them and in the most suspicious ways.

—Good luck, Podetti, you can count on me for whatever you need; and tell your son to be careful. He's facing very dangerous people and there are many interests at stake. Although they also include the real interests of our blessed nation, whom somebody needs to defend courageously.

—Thanks, admiral, you don't know how right you are — I said, switching off the recorder and thinking how the reasons for being concerned over Raúl's safety continued to pile up, while I was still unable to let him know the danger he was in.

A while later I ran into Benja, whom I had been already looking for for several days. The last two deliveries had accumulated, so I immediately showed them to our colleague the influencer.

Benja carefully took up the two cassettes and inspected them in detail with the amazement and veneration of an archeologist faced with a thousand-year-old

relic; he was further dazzled when I also gave him the Walkman, since without that “high tech” item it would have been impossible for him to access the contents. Lastly, I gave him the envelope with the papers and images, which he right away scanned with his phone. I also told him about the green Falcon (he didn’t even know that the military Junta had favored those cars) but made no mention of Admiral Zero; Benja would surely never have heard of him, as happens with all these kids of the Z generation.

Benja pondered for a few minutes and, while proudly showing me his new tattoo, said he would hack – an action he explained to me, but which I chose to immediately forget – some servers to filter these contents, so they would stealthily infiltrate the news sections of the principal media.

That concluded the originally drafted plan. Everyone had done his homework and now it was time to await the reaction.

But I was left with the difficult – I’d say impossible – task of urgently letting Raúl know of the threat that had been received. I still couldn’t think of a way. Martha’s voice rang in my ears, telling both of us, years before, to be careful with these matters, that we were meddling with colossal interests that involved deals in the millions and people without scruples, both in Argentina and abroad. It was a good think I had never told her the terrible stories of the other *affaires*! How right she was, as usual.

Before leaving, Benja apologized for having been away the last few days and told me had gone to a technology congress where it was presented the concept of a system by which those of us up here would manage to communicate with those down there. A lot of research remained to be done, but a prototype might be available soon. This could be a revolution and would lead to having to reform the Celestial Rules on Unilateral Communications (CERUC).

—Cool, isn’t it? — Benja concluded.

Thinking of my urgency to contact Raúl over the threat received, I asked him for all the details, which I obviously didn’t understand at all,

—Benja, you have to get me that prototype. I need you to help me bend the CERUC. It could be a matter of life and death.

L’Affaire Argentine

Part II

What I had experienced the day before at the get-together with Marie had been very intense, and not only because of the matters we talked about but because of that very strange feeling I had been having since our first meeting just three days earlier. It was as if Dad established a presence at every moment, turning up at every corner, trying to slip into my thoughts, as if attempting to tell me something. It must have been the memories triggered by all these matters.

I got to the meeting before Marie did and settled down to read a print-edition newspaper, which I love to do in bars while sipping coffee.

Among the tangle of articles on the war in Ukraine and the internal disagreements within the governing front, I discovered an item that strongly impacted me. Just as I had heard a few days earlier, in a few more weeks, in mid-April 2022, delivery would be made of the fourth and last (I hoped) Argentine OPV built in France. Our new Defense Minister would be going to meet it with a commission from the Navy. In passing – and this was the part that hit me hard – they would move ahead with the negotiation for the purchase, from that same French shipyard, of a fleet of *Scorpène* submarines. The same ones linked to the bribes and murders in the other *affaires* I had read about in the book presented by Marie!

Suddenly, there was Marie, untidy and addled as always, glued to her cellphone. After saying hello, I told her about the article I had just read.

—*Raoul* — she answered as if she were not surprised — in the I have been doing these investigations I’ve learned that these matters of corruption in military purchases aren’t exclusive to one political party or another. They happen in almost all governments, and the contacts for making these deals are inherited from one

administration to the next. Generally, it is corrupt career officer who, even after retirement, provide continuity for these shady deals.

I didn't want to tell you earlier so as not to add to your worries, but on December 18, 2018, in the same period as the OPV, the Navy Materials Office also bought obsolete *Super Étendard* fighters for Naval Aviation, for some 13 million euros. The alleged hurry to make an urgent purchase was to improve air safety coverage during the G20 meeting, for which they obviously were no good. Up to now not a single one of those planes has managed to take off.

—That's crazy! What a country! — I mumbled, deeply distressed — After so many years I find out that *L'Affaire Argentine* involves not only ships but also planes and now submarines. This has to be stopped once and for all — I said with great sadness and tearful eyes, thinking of so many needy people in my country, but also of the vain efforts of guys like my old man.

—*Raoul, si vous voulez*, we interrupt this and continue some other day. I see you very hard hit by all this news.

—No, Marie, I'm sorry, I just can't get used to it. Nor do I want to. I would rather we continue and try to round out our work. I feel we're near to the end and it would be best to finish this up today without fail.

Besides, tonight we wanted to celebrate having met you. My wife, Claudia asked me to invite you to our home to dine with a typically Argentine meal.

—Excellent! I'll try to spruce up a bit — she said in self-mockery.

—OK, let's carry on where we left off yesterday. Remember to switch on the recorder so you can concentrate on your illustrations, which I think are delightful.

Some months had already passed since that meeting with the President in Holland. On September 12, 2017, at the traditional ceremony on board the frigate *ARA Sarmiento* for Argentine Shipbuilding Industry Day, an admiral of the Navy's Naval Materials Office, whom you've named *L'Admiral Michelin*, came up to me and said:

—Engineer, I have some news that'll please you. By presidential order, the direct negotiation with France has been canceled and there will be an international public tender for the OPV.

As soon as I got over my surprise, I asked him for more information and he replied:

—You criticized the process harshly at the time, Podetti. I remember that day at the meeting in Government House. The negotiation with France was taking on water from all sides, was going to get all kinds of criticism, and your proposal for domestic construction made a deep mark at the President's Office. As you can imagine, there are a lot of very angry officers, but you must be very happy.

—Admiral, this is a unique opportunity, similar to the case of Admiral Eleazar Videla and the fleet of Parker-class minesweepers eighty years ago, when a strategic decision by the Navy marked the beginning of the modern shipbuilding industry in the country. We must ensure that, with the necessary international support, the ships are built here. With equivalent quality, price, schedules and guarantees. That must be in the spirit of the tender specifications.

—Well —responded the admiral — actually what we're thinking of isn't quite so. The idea is for the Navy to freely consider several countries' proposals, including those of France and even Argentina itself, but we prefer that there be no prior conditioning on where it's preferable to build. And what you're proposing would be to have a certain preference for Argentines.

—Well, of course, just like the French Navy has for the French, or the American one has for Americans, or the Chilean one for Chileans, not to look too far — I replied, begging to feel irritated.

—No. We must call for bids and may the best offer win. If the Argentine proposal costs one extra dollar or takes one day more, the Navy will

prefer to build abroad — he answered me with a supercilious half-smile.

—But admiral, what would you, personally, like to see happen? Wouldn't you like it, even a little, for the ships to be built here competitively?

—I only want what's best for the Navy. To have the best possible ships and the sooner the better. Nothing but that. That's why so many people in the Navy are angry with you. Your insistence on that business about giving jobs to Argentines and about comprehensive development has already made us miss the opportunity France was giving us — he said, raising his voice, which made other guests at the ceremony look our way.

—But you know very well that it was totally disadvantageous for Argentina! You've just told me that. It wasn't any good. It was very bad!

— I told him, feeling the urge to tear off the bunch of insignias he carried on his chest.

—It was good for us — he declared as the atmosphere was thickening to the limit.

—But not for Argentina — I managed to put in even as the admiral, without saying goodbye, turned heel towards the gangplank to leave the *ARA Sarmiento*.

When I heard the sailor on guard pipe that high-ranking officer ashore, I was reminded of that completely opposite attitude of another admiral also linked to the purchase of a military vessel — which happened to also be the frigate *ARA Sarmiento*. I remembered when, in 1896, Admiral Domecq García paid an advance on the construction of that frigate, in the name of Argentina, with the personal check he had received as the customary 'thanks' from the British shipyard contracted after arduous negotiations.

At that moment I realized it was essential that I get through, as quickly as possible, to the new Defense Minister, on whom this tender would surely depend.

Thirty days later, thanks to some contacts I still had in the Cabinet Chief's Office, I managed to have the sought-after meeting set up, and there I explained the following to the minister:

—If Argentina simply goes out to buy a fleet of patrol vessels, foreign shipyards will offer those built in their countries of origin, selling us 100% of the value of the ships. But if Argentina issues an international tender for this purchase, with the condition of total financing and local construction, which is of the order of 35% of the value, the countries will compete to sell us the remaining 65%. There'll be the same foreign interest in participating in one case and the other, but the benefit for Argentina will be much greater and the cost, quality and lead time similar.

The minister seemed really convinced; he transmitted to me the enthusiasm that the President already felt for this idea, and invited me to supervise the specifications for the upcoming tender for the patrol ships for precisely that to happen and not what the Navy people preferred.

I left the Ministry full of hope. It was the third time in twenty years that I met in the same office with different Defense ministers over the same matter, but the saying was about to come true – 'third time lucky'.

—*Merveilleux!* — Marie applauded as if watching a stage play.

—Yes, Marie, the sun seemed to be coming out. But it lasted very little. Some weeks later, in November 2017, the tragic incident with the submarine *ARA San Juan* put the patrol ships project, and the country itself, on pause. At the Defense Ministry there could be no other subject of conversation. On TV, seamen attempted to explain the inexplicable. The Storni shipyard, run by Tandanor, a candidate for building the new patrol vessels, was in the eye of the storm. It was there, it seemed, that the batteries that appeared to be the cause of the incident had been changed. And that entire suspicious repair was being investigated. At the same time, the signs that the national economy was beginning to collapse were impossible to hide.

The government faced ever tougher financial problems (as usual) and a greater bailout by the International Monetary Fund, IMF, began to be more and more essential (again, as usual).

The foreign investment that had been expected, as a result of the new foreign policy that supposedly was to reinsert us in the world, hadn't come in. And two of the concrete achievements that the government expected to exhibit in this regard were being braked by, precisely, a French veto. They were the agreement of the European Union with Mercosur and access by Argentine biodiesel to Europe.

The French President knew that he couldn't keep up those vetoes indefinitely and that, in addition, both the subject of Mercosur and that of biodiesel had a rather political effect on Argentina. At the first chance, the hurdles could be set up again, as in fact happened shortly afterwards.

The Argentine government desperately needed the IMF's favor and begged France on its knees to approve those trade agreements even if they were empty of real content and to keep them up even if for a short time, for example until the elections.

Both things depended on the decision of a powerful French couple that led the Gallic government and the IMF. And they knew it.

At my next-to-last meeting with one of my contacts in the Cabinet Chief's Office, I found out that among the unofficial demands of this singular French couple to provide their signatures, was the direct purchase of the patrol ships for the Navy. But now the conditions were already much tougher.

- All the ships were to be built in France. Nothing for Argentina.
- They would no longer be four new ships. One of them would be the old one they couldn't get rid of.
- The technical specifications would now be those that were most convenient for the French government-owned shipyard, not those that are required on the Argentine Sea.

- The urgent negotiation had to be secret and be shielded to circumvent a new Argentine law that had just been passed and that turned this into a clearly illegal operation.

Undoubtedly, getting the chance to sell our biodiesel in Europe and move ahead with trade integration with Europe was a good thing, but there had to be a better way to negotiate. I then decided to make one last attempt.

I prepared a paper for my contact in Government House to hand to the President. Basically, I proposed that if we were going to give in to the French pressure, we do so without mortgaging everything. The basic position was as follows:

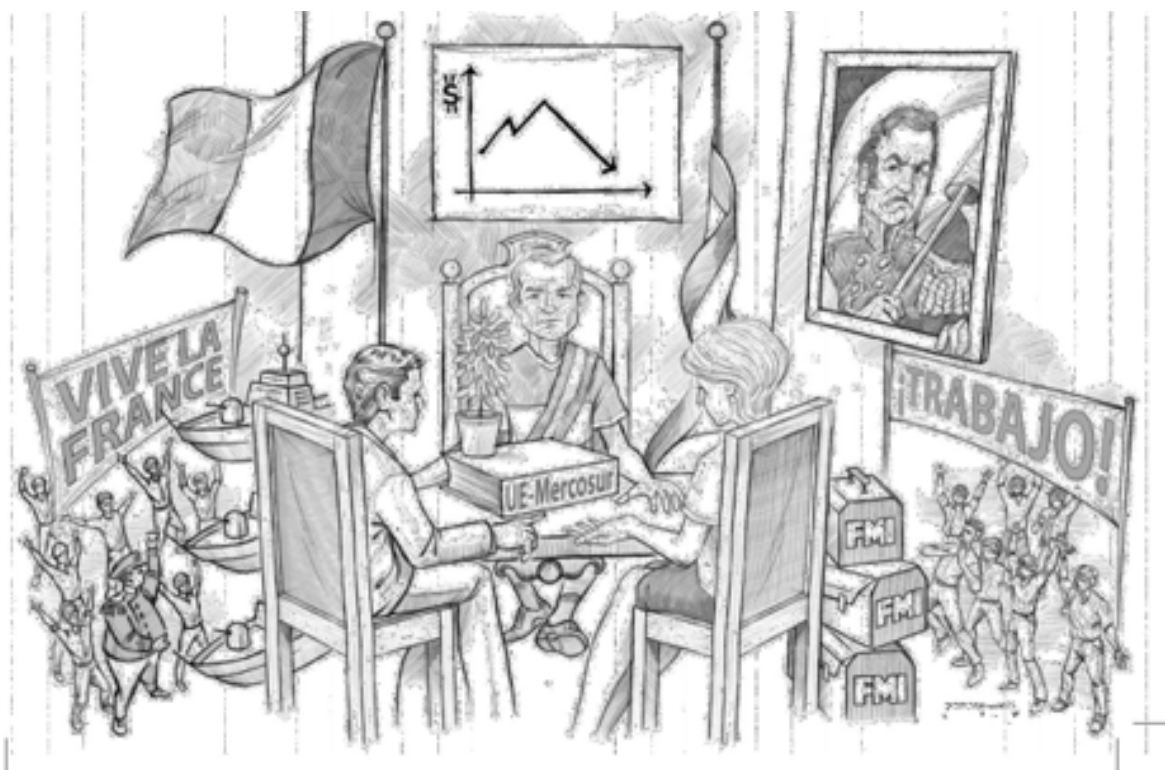
That instead of our buying four finished ships from them, they sell us, for the same amount, the equipment and materials not produced here, needed for us to build 6 suitable ships, with total credit provided by France. Thus, the volume of 'France's business' would be the same as in selling us 4 complete ships but allowing employment and development to be generated in Argentina and increasing our patrolling capacity by 50%. What is known as a win-win result.

This was beneficial for France, Argentina and the Navy (which seemed to have a different interest than the country) which would thus have two extra units. Additionally, it avoided the accusations that were certain to come over non-compliance with the new Shipbuilding Industry Law that expressly forbade that form of purchase, and over contracting the French shipyard whose corruption scandals were already international news.

I don't know if this paper ever reached its destination, but I heard no more of the matter despite my insistence.

And that, Marie, was how, in December 2018, the abominable agreement was arrived at to buy the ships from France under the double Gallic pressure.

—*Merde!, Pardon. L'Accord Infame* (Abominable Agreement) will be the name of this new stage.



—That drawing is perfect, Marie.

For some instants I remained looking at the scene that portrayed the situation so well, and then continued:

—The following months were terrible. As the social environment became ever more heated in the face of the rising inflation, poverty, lack of jobs, and inconceivable level of indebtedness, the government turned a deaf ear and moved ahead avoiding reality with minimal attention and sensitivity.

Our book that presented the case of those patrol ships had been published shortly before and had had a certain repercussion in the press, and the international corruption scandals at the French governmental shipyard resounded ever louder. But none of that mattered; any method was valid to reach that signing with France. Even actual illegality. In the last days of 2017, the Shipbuilding Industry Law had finally been adopted; lengthily debated, it had at

last been agreed on between the government and the opposition and included an article forbidding the import of vessels for the State without the prior approval of a Commission in defense of domestic industry. In non-compliance with all deadlines, the government avoided issuing the enabling regulations for that Commission until precisely a few days after the signing of the illegal contract with France, in late December 2018.

Something very similar is happening today with the already agreed-on ban on importing old fishing vessels, the enabling regulations for which are being delayed suspiciously, while national officials promote the improper entry of a 40-year-old foreign fishing ship.

Marie, this is another case that confirms what you told me at the outset about corruption being the common denominator between different governments and using the same wrongful plays.



And that was the final stage of the *Affaire Argentine*, a race in which Argentina lost, — I added to Marie, physically and spiritually exhausted by the tale.

—*Une fin vraiment terrible, Raoul*, — Marie tenderly agreed in a consoling voice, pressing my hand in hers and showing me her last drawing, as she turned off the recorder.

L'Arrivée de la Carrière perdue (The Finish Line of the Lost Race)

—It's terrible, Marie. Seeing our navy officers toasting that Argentina lost and they won. That exactly describes the kernel of the problem.

We remained a while in silence. We were worn out.

—*Pour moi, ç'est suffisant*. I have all I need to present the case. I believe that, unfortunately, it's very juicy, and its ramifications with airplanes, and now also submarines, promise a major international scandal, which hopefully will serve to cause the fall of the guilty parties. At least here there haven't been deaths as in other *affaires* — Marie concluded.

At this point Marie switched on her cellphone, which, out of respect for the intensity of the conversation and so as to concentrate better, she had kept off for many hours. It awakened with the buzzing of the many messages that had been accumulating.

A quick scan caused her to change the tender expression and empathetic attitude to which I had already become accustomed. The hyperactive and addled Marie was gradually reappearing. Which, I asked myself, could be real one?

Marie closed her eyes a few seconds and said to me:

—*Raoul*, I've got to go. I have to take a plane this very night. *Merci et pardon* to Claudia for missing the invitation to dine.

—Oh, you have to go back to France? Has something serious happened?

—No, I'm going to Australia — she told me, rolling her eyes as if that were a heavy and unexpected burden — Actually, I would have loved to rest a few days in this beautiful city, but I've been chasing this confirmation for a long time. A colleague

in this work and I are going to meet there because several leads have appeared in the investigation, we're making into a case that also took place in those years with the same French shipyard.

Seeing my expression of surprise and interest, she continued:

—The Australian government is being investigated for exaggerated favoritism to the French governmental shipyard. It's their biggest military contract in history: 150 billion dollars for 12 submarines, without any kind of anti-corruption auditing despite the warnings in the face of all these scandals that already place this French shipyard on the winners' podium in worldwide naval corruption with a billion dollars in bribes.

It's a huge case. And while I'm telling it you this way, in a big rush, I'm thinking of all we've been talking about, and an idea comes to mind, to ask you for a favor: would you allow me to call it *L'Affaire Australienne*?

My answer was a smile. Marie then added,

—And give me your opinion on the case when I email it to you. *Oui*?

—*Bien sûr* — I replied as I also switched my cellphone on. An email, titled "OPV," immediately came in. I scanned it quickly and then raised my eyes and said to her, — Marie, you're not going to believe this, but I've just received a mail from the Director of Investigations of the Argentine government's Anti-Corruption Office. He tells he read about the OPV case in my book and wants me to help move ahead with the investigation.

—That's wonderful, *Raou!* Always very carefully, moving ahead firmly, but looking both ways... And precisely now, when I have to leave, when it seems that something could begin to become unwrapped sooner than expected! The important thing is to give these cases visibility. That way, others will begin to dare to speak up, and when society begins to rebel, this becomes unstoppable. There are no perfect crimes.

We got up to say goodbye and fell into a big hug.

—During these days together — she began to tell me, her eyes moist — but especially today, listening to you, looking at you and sharing your infectious

fervor, something very strange has happened to me... I'm even ashamed to tell you.

Half surprised, half befuddled, noticing that Marie was addressing me in a more informal Spanish form and wasn't letting go of my hand, hoping not to have generated something I wasn't looking for, I asked with a certain apprehension,

—What's happened?

Marie, with a look I think I'll never forget, replied:

—*Raoul*, with you I've felt something new, very strong, for the first time in my life. It had never happened to me. I can assure you. And it has nothing to do with the story, it's not a 'professional' matter, but very personal. Almost magical. — and, after a pause that seemed endless to me, she added — I feel as if your father had been at our side the entire time, listening, participating, contributing. Especially right now, at this instant, I feel him trying to tell us something important. Urgently. Are you sure there isn't something else that your father might know and you aren't aware of? Something he needed to tell us?

—No, Marie, I can't think of anything — I replied emotionally.

We hugged again and to reassure her I promised,

—If I remember anything else, I'll call you immediately. It's all been very intense, try to relax a bit at least during these hours before you get to Sydney.

A few seconds later, the "other Marie" had newly reappeared, attempting to collect her scattered papers, her laptop, her bag, her handbag, her jacket. The young woman began to walk towards the door without ceasing to type urgently on her cellphone.

Before crossing the threshold, she stopped to turn her head and tell me,

—A final rule in my line of work: 'Always only share the information with someone you wholly trust'.

Marie winked an eye at me, almost imperceptibly, and turning to leave again, added from the doorway,

—I've just sent you the files on *L'Affaire Argentine*, a copy of the entire investigation, my notes, conclusions, and contacts with international investigation editors, who are awaiting this material to publish it. *Adieu!*

At that moment I became her backup.

And she ran out into the street, knocking into the things in her hand, to look for a taxi.

At that moment my cellphone began to give notice of the files sent by Marie. I was about to open them when I was startled by the strong squeal of a car's tires, then a sharp thud, silence and after that the shouts of people on the street.

I get up to see what's going on. Through the window I see that people have swarmed together and are mindlessly trampling on a hundred sheets of paper that have been scattered on the ground. I can't see what has happened, but when I reach the bar's door, I manage to see a jacket, a handbag... Fearing the worst, I run out.

—It's horrible! She was stepping out so absent-mindedly, looking at her cellphone!

— an elderly man says.

—First someone on a motorcycle snatched her bag — a young woman at his side reported emphatically — and then, a car that had been waiting for her came from behind. She was run over on purpose.

—Raúl, I have been told a young lady is coming up, looking for you — Martha says.

Dad takes Mom's hand and says to her:

—Let's greet her together. She's a friend of Raulito's and has just arrived. Her name is Marie.

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