

Kirchner: To Have a Future, We Must Face the Past

We publish below excerpts of the speech given by President Néstor Kirchner on April 2, 2006, at the ceremony to honor "Veterans and Those Fallen in the Malvinas War." The Argentine President spoke at Palomar, in the province of Buenos Aires. The excerpts are translated from Spanish. Subheads have been added.

My brothers, veterans of the Malvinas War, Mr. Vice-President, members of the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary, governors and head of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the General Staff of the Armed Forces; members of the diplomatic corps; mayors, national, regional, and municipal authorities, labor leaders, ladies and gentlemen:

The Argentine nation ratifies its legitimate and undeniable sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands, the South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, and the corresponding maritime and insular areas, as an integral part of our national territory. . . .

This is stated in the First Transitional Resolution of our national Constitution. It is one of our central objectives as a government and it is appropriate to remember it on this date. The noble cause of recovering effective sovereignty over our archipelago and sea, illegally occupied since 1833, unites all Argentines, beyond and outside any other political differences.

On this occasion, we find ourselves before one of the great national causes, in which values that we must boldly rescue coexist: dialogue, exercise of national sovereignty with dignity and respect for human rights, justice, and truth. The tragic circumstances under which the dictatorship tried to place this cause at the service of a subterfuge so as to survive an adverse political conjuncture, should not cloud the analysis.

The Dictatorship's Mistakes

In 1982, we witnessed the dictatorship's mistaken decision to save itself by planning and executing a war, while lying about its true intentions. But there was also loyalty, bravery, patriotism, and the generous sacrifice of our people and of thousands of soldiers—*thousands* of soldiers—who never hesitated to respond to the fatherland's call. The Malvinas was, in a sense, another of the dictatorship's crimes and a great frustration: the irresponsible decision to launch a war exposed the many limitations these technicians of horror had when it came to fighting real battles. But, in another sense, the Malvinas is also the fatherland's altar to the heroism of its people who, as at the beginning of our short history, knew how to forge men such as our war veterans, willing to give their lives for others, to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland, despite the strategic and political mistake of those who illegally governed at that time.

The task that we Argentines must undertake in the context of the complexity surrounding the event we remember today, is that of preventing our heroes from becoming the victims of that complexity. They become victims when they are forgotten; they become victims when we hide them, as they were hidden away after the battle ended. They are victims when their action in defense of our national rights is not recognized in concrete deeds. The fight to recover the Malvinas should help us to find a place of remembrance and reflection, from which we can learn from mistakes so as not to repeat them. . . .

Argentina must recognize those mistakes and demonstrate our ability to improve. We must rebuild our self-esteem, not to repeat the past, but to face our future with ideals and convictions. Let us remember and reflect. We cannot allow the desire to forget blame erase our memory and leave history merely as a blur. Let's put an end to that history repeated by some who thought they could settle the debt they owed us by de-Malvinizing Argentina.

Let us pay homage to those who fell on our Malvinas soil and in its waters; to those who still feel themselves in the trenches and cannot return from their internal exile, after being relegated for years to ungrateful oblivion. . . .

Let us speak with absolute clarity, because this is the only way to set the story straight. What is white is white, and what is black is definitely black. While the State must accept responsibility, we never saw those economic groups and those who backed the dictatorship, come out to support our soldiers when they returned from battle. The State was irresponsible, but who propped up that State? That is why, brothers and sisters, in Argentina we must speak with absolutely clarity, from the standpoint of our relative truth but without fear. . . .

Together in democracy and in peace, we are strengthening the institutions, although we still haven't escaped the hell into which we were thrown; and despite certain media that are loath to admit it, we are and we are going to be, much better. I always tell my colleagues, and from my heart I say to the soldiers of the Malvinas: Ignore what certain media say.

Worry about what the Argentine people say. That's what matters—the hearts of Argentines who feel and respect those engaged in the nation's work.

I also tell the political leadership not to worry about what one or another reporter might say; stop crawling on your knees before them—let them write what they want. You defend the nation with the force that the nation requires, that is the key point. . . .

Brothers and sisters: they can attack, slander, insult me, and say whatever they want, but I am always going to fight for the new Argentina, and for a fatherland for everyone. They are not going to force me down on my knees, you can be absolutely sure of that! . . .

That they have committed the crimes we have mentioned and worse, can never invalidate our rightful claim, and it is fair to say that the Malvinas are ours, that they are Argentine, and that those brothers who fought there went in defense of those values, on behalf of all of us. They were outnumbered, but they didn't cry. They held our flag high, with honor and pride. The shame was when they came home, and were hidden from public view.

Dear God! Poor Argentina, what things have happened to us, when we should have welcomed them back as national heroes! Defeat by a big power isn't what mattered. What mattered was the dignity of those who went and gave their all! Malvinas isn't a military problem; it should be a national objective of all Argentines, and with dialogue, diplomacy and peace, we should recover them for the fatherland. But dialogue, diplomacy and peace don't mean hanging your head in shame. Dialogue, diplomacy and peace mean defending the rights that are ours over the Malvinas Islands with dignity and pride. Let us not confuse being peace-lovers with inaction. . . .

Internally, overcoming the mistaken, sinister and senseless military conception that designed and executed that war strategy, should lead to a profound strategic self-criticism in military doctrine and operations. In my humble opinion, and without pretending to own the truth, the most striking lesson lies in the necessity of definitively understanding that the three branches together constitute a single military component of the nation.

Empowering the work of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, devising a single national defense doctrine, jointly procuring materiel, and formulating defense actions in a single stroke, constitute an irrevocable course of action for our Government: a unified defense policy under the constitutional leadership of the Executive branch. On the international front, we must act in deliberate fashion, such that our economic recovery, the prestige we are regaining, and persistence in our peaceful claim, will allow us to gradually increase the non-military resources at our disposal, until the anachronistic colonial status which we strongly denounce, becomes unsustainable.

Summarizing what I said at the beginning, we know what

the Constitutional mandate is. We know that messianism or ultramontane and isolating nationalism must never take the place of patriotic and democratic nationalism based on the will of the people, and the reason, law, and serene passion built on this. We know that beneath each civilian suit or military uniform, united by the national Constitution, beat the hearts of our citizens. Our citizenry, our people, have the common commitment to regaining sovereignty over our islands. . .

We Shall Be Persistent

We won't give up. We shall be persistent. We shall go forward with fortitude to comply with our Constitutional mandate. We have the support of the entire international community's call for these negotiations to begin again to find a peaceful solution to our countries' dispute over sovereignty. The effort the government and our people are making to restore the General Welfare and reestablish hope for the future of our fatherland; and the recovery of our international prestige gives us hope that we shall see our island territories and the maritime spaces that surround them, once again under effective Argentine sovereignty.

Argentines of all walks of life must light in their hearts a flame of homage to our 649 fallen, and to the young men who almost daily took their own lives because they were forgotten by those who should have never forgotten them; to those who felt alone, to those who had doors shut in their faces, to those who some see as a burden, and who for others are brothers who honor us; to those who for some only exist on April 2, and to those who for the majority of Argentines, exist and should exist every single day, because they are a clear reflection of our remembrance.

Their names are engraved on the monument built in the Plaza San Martín. But that's not enough. It's not enough to organize a ceremony once a year. I repeat. Not only the State, but all Argentines, must together recommit themselves to a spirit of solidarity in support of those who were there—officers and non-commissioned officers of our fatherland—Argentine soldiers fighting for their country.

This is the same flame that keeps alive the memory of San Martín, of Belgrano, of Brown and Moreno, and of so many other of our forefathers who inspired the courage and wisdom to defend the fatherland. We must pay just homage to the veterans of this war, who showed courage, willingness to defend our soil, spirit of solidarity, and who often had to act virtually alone because there were very few of us who supported them, when we lived through what came to be known as de-Malvinization. We must not ever return to the time when the Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum 228/82, dated July 15, 1982, established among the guidelines set for all radio and television coverage, that it was a national security risk to issue defeatist reports or mention the 18-year-old soldiers or ask their opinion of their superiors. This was a truly shameful memorandum, but we cannot forget it.

Now in this new era for our fatherland, let's put things in their place. Let us be committed to caring for our beloved veterans, to try to compensate them for everything they gave during those unforgettable days; to ensure that they receive what we owe them for having defended the dignity of our national sovereignty on the battlefield, on the seas, and in our skies. They have names. They are human beings of flesh and blood. They suffered anguish and went without. They are our contemporary heroes.

Let us have faith in our country's future. We have absolute conviction in the justice of our claims and our rights. We must actively and patiently resist and fight for as many years and days as it takes. Argentines must regain their self-esteem. The battle we fought in 1982 and what we suffered, were tough. But my dear Argentines, what happened after our painful defeat was shameful. It was as if each of us went into our own hiding place, and we abandoned those who fought. Those who ruled Argentina once again displayed their cowardice, and when they had to show their faces, they escaped any way they could. They had already done it several years earlier, and they did it again on that day.

With all due respect and affection for our dear military commanders, and our current soldiers and officers, it was cowardly generals who dishonored our Army and our people. But there were also the civilians who supported them, and while the television put out reports that we were winning the battle, [those civilians] were there encouraging ultramontaine nationalism. When the worst occurred, many of them and the economic power that backed the system, disappeared. They didn't stay around to aid the fallen or those who fought, or to help our fatherland.

We must never forget this, because many of those interests still operate in Argentina today. Some of them are rejuvenated, or have changed and taken on new forms. But the Argentine people must remember, because this is how we shall definitively consolidate our nation. To our heroes and Malvinas soldiers with whom we are making progress on solutions—and there is certainly much more to be done, and we do what we can—I want to say that for the period in which I am called upon to govern Argentina, I didn't come to make a pact with the past, nor did I come believing that national unity is possible by covering up the bad things that Argentines may be hiding. This is what has prevented us from building a nation. I can assure you that with whatever mistakes I might make, or good things I may do, I am committed to advance, advance, and advance; and, God willing, the Argentine people will walk with me to build a fatherland with, and for, everyone, so that Argentines can look each other in the eye and say, "At last we feel like Argentines, and we shall move forward to defend this history, this fatherland, this soil, this flag, this land which honors us all, and the legacy of our heroes and our forefathers!"

Combatants of the Malvinas, officers and soldiers: Forgive us, and many thanks for what you did for our fatherland.