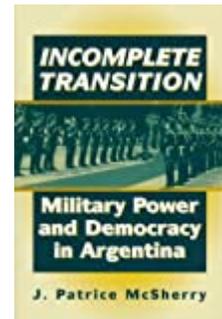




J. Patrice McSherry. *Incomplete Transition: Military Power and Democracy in Argentina.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. viii + 408 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16252-8.



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Military Power in Argentina Reviewed

I have heard it said that those in Latin America who laugh last, just don't yet understand. J. Patrice McSherry's aptly titled study, *Incomplete Transition: Military Power and Democracy in Argentina* lends credence to this idea. Analyzing the recent political history of the Alfonsín years (1983-1989) as well as the more recent Menem administrations (1989-1996), McSherry challenges the current view that Argentina's democracy has been consolidated. Through a combination of historical-structure and institutional approaches (p. v), she concludes that a guardian democracy has emerged. In other words, with the 1983 transition to democracy, the former military regime did not collapse, but rather evolved and continued to shape the new government.

McSherry's goal is to evaluate the influence of military power on Argentine state and society and its far-reaching repercussions, especially after the transition to civilian rule in 1983 ... [and illustrate] how a nation tries to recover from the trauma of state terror, transform the armed forces that carried it out and rebuild the civilian institutions and democratic life (p. 1). To her credit, *Incomplete Transition* goes beyond this intent in

providing a historical framework for these various developments. After outlining the scope of her study and tackling amorphous concepts such as state, government, regime, and democracy, McSherry begins the arduous process of explaining the politico-ideological development of the armed forces. Beginning in the 1920s, she details the makeup of the Argentine armed forces and traces their politicization throughout the middle-half of the twentieth-century.

The military's role as political actor matures with the emergence of the Cold War. In one of her most insightful chapters, McSherry links the developing bipolar world to the development of a national security doctrine. That is, the growing anticommunism of the Argentine armed forces added a deeply ideological and messianic dimension to military thinking. The holy war against subversion led to a new definition of the enemy that encompassed many sectors of the population (p. 58). Thus, based on this doctrine, the military actively intervened in national politics in 1966, overthrowing Illia in the first institutional coup d'état. The resulting golpista ushered in the first national security state, which, more than a

temporary corrective measure, marked the influence of anticommunist hysteria coupled with the rise of social opposition in Argentina. For the next decade, as McSherry details, the military became entrenched in politics, establishing national security structures, ideology, and counterinsurgency methods (p. 59).

Ironically, one of the benefits of focusing on the Argentine military is a better understanding of Argentine politics. During the 1970s, this included the return of Peron. While much has been written about enigmatic peronismo, McSherry attributes his return to developments within the armed forces. Because of the emerging revolutionary fervor resulting from military repression, the dominant liberal-right wingists sought a controlled transition to civilian rule. Thus in 1973 exiled leader, Juan Peron, triumphantly returned to power, if only in name. Within three years of ascendancy, Peronismo had all but died with a coup aimed at the creation of a more drastic national security state. From 1976 to 1983, Argentina witnessed a consolidation of national security ideology, structures, methods—including the infamous Dirty War—all the while the military planned the transition to a guardian democracy.

The second part of McSherry's work focuses on this 1983 transition and its results. While initially viewed by scholars as a watershed in shifting Argentina from military to democratic rule, McSherry concludes that the transformation was lacking. In the ensuing decade and a half, the new Argentine democracy never separated itself from previous rule and continued to espouse the same values and political objectives of the military and national security structures (p. vi). In reality, the 1983 transition was incomplete with a guardian democracy resulting.

During the Alfonsin tenure (1983-1989), the ideas, the structures, and the methods of the national security state persisted. In terms of ideology, McSherry notes the tenets of national security doctrine still permeated the armed forces. In short, they believed that surveillance and control of the population were military functions (p. 146). A wonderful example of this is the ensuing fight over the legacy of the Dirty War. Further complicating the monumental task of democratizing the Argentine state and society, the Alfonsin administration compromised and allowed the continued existence of national security structures, such as the politically autonomous intelligence organizations and the grupos de tarea (disappearance squads). Needless to say, the existence of such groups furthered military integration into Argentine pol-

itics and society and, in turn, hampered the consolidation of democracy.

Because of the leniency and conciliatory stance of the Alfonsin government, and later during Menem reign, at times, the military overtly intervened in national politics in order to secure their objectives. Unable to conduct old-style coups, the military decided on a strategy of low-intensity coups, calculated to secure military interests below the threshold of overthrowing the government (p. 226). The prime example of this development was that of the Carapintada revolts beginning in the latter half of the 1980s. Their objection to liberal democracy coupled with insubordination eventually secured from the government substantial prerogatives that the military had lost during the transition. Continuing under the Menem years, military ties with the government grew and allowed for the values and norms of national security to persevere often under the ruse of a battle against subversion. As a result, McSherry concludes that the transition to democracy was incomplete in the 1980s and remained so in the mid-1990s (p. 290).

Needless to say, *Incomplete Transition* proves to be a worthwhile study not only in terms of its historical value, but also in its theoretical approach. To bolster her findings and interpretations, McSherry conducted exhaustive research, evident in the nearly 100 pages of detailed and insightful footnotes. Likewise, she made numerous trips to Argentina including living there for a period of time on a Fulbright Grant. While there, she conducted roughly 150 interviews. Yet, refreshing in her work is the attempt to evaluate evidence into existing facts, at times somewhat akin to a task of a private investigator. In terms of methodological questions raised by secret, anonymous interviews or even contradictory findings, McSherry openly acknowledges gaps and possible misleading information. Along the same line, she readily utilizes previous scholarship, at times building upon it and other times noting its deficiencies. In short, in treating most every significant issue, she provides an excellent introduction to the historiographical background all the while adding to it herself.

While McSherry targets Argentina, she provides numerous insights and some interesting parallels to other Latin American countries that possibly deserve more attention than a handful of pages. By arguing that guardian democracies exist throughout the region—Chile, Peru, Guatemala, Brazil, Honduras, Paraguay, Uruguay—one is left wondering whether Argentina's experience was purely a result of its own experience or if there is a com-

mon thread rooted centuries back that runs throughout Latin America. Is it possible that the ethos of modern ruling regimes have been shaped by the colonial past of these countries? Similarly, historians may wonder if there is evidence of earlier incomplete transitions to guardian democracies in western civilization? If so, what sparked their development, how did these events play out, and what might be the lessons of such development?

Though, these questions are not so much criticisms leveled at McSherry's work, but rather an adulation for the issues that her work sparks. In short, *Incomplete Transition* proves to be quite a rewarding study.

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