



Source: Orfila, 7 September 1977, during the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty, Wikimedia Commons, National Archives and Records Administration 176081

ORFILA, Washington Alejandro José Luis (Alejandro or Alex) Argentine diplomat and fifth Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) 1975-1984

By **Klaas Dykmann** · Version 10 February 2017

Washington Alejandro José Luis (known as Alejandro or Alex), Argentine diplomat and fifth Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) 1975-1984, was born 9 March 1925 in Mendoza, Argentina. He is the son of Alejandro Orfila, lawyer and regional governor, and Angélica De Benito. In 1951 he married Jean d'Aprile. They have one daughter and three sons. The marriage was dissolved in 1975. On 12 March 1977 he married Helga Leifeld, model.

Biography

Orfila grew up in Argentina's Mendoza region, known for its tradition of winemaking. His family had been involved in winemaking for generations, with his grandfather establishing the José Orfila Limitada winery in 1905. Along with the winery, cattle ranching had made the family wealthy. Orfila was an only child and his mother died when he was six months old. His father, a lawyer, was interested in politics and a great admirer of United States (US) General and President George Washington. He was elected governor of the province of Mendoza in 1926, but the federal government removed him from office in 1928 for being too progressive. He returned to practicing law and later sent his son to the newly established American school in Buenos Aires in order to learn English. At this school Orfila also learned about US culture and politics. He went on to study law at the University of Buenos Aires, where he graduated with a law degree in 1945, and continued his education in the US, studying political science at Stanford University and foreign trade at Tulane University. Thanks to the help of a family friend he avoided military service and in 1946, when Argentina appointed its first ambassador to the Soviet Union, he joined the embassy staff in Moscow. When he informed his father that he wanted to go into the Foreign Service, rather than the family

business, his father did not speak to him for two years. In 1947 the Soviet Union declared Orfila persona non grata on the grounds of espionage. He then moved to the Argentine embassy in Warsaw, Poland, but was declared persona non grata once more. Transferred to the US, Orfila held consular posts in San Francisco (1948) and New Orleans (1949-1950) and was Secretary at the Argentine embassy in Washington DC (1951-1952). In 1952 Orfila was called back to Mendoza to take care of the family business, but in 1953, when offered the post of Director of Information at the Organization of American States (OAS), he returned to Washington DC, where he headed the OAS Office of Public Relations until 1958.

From 1958 to 1960 Orfila served as Argentina's Minister Plenipotentiary to the US and from 1960 to 1962 he was Ambassador to Japan. In 1963 he left the Foreign Service once again, this time to work as a private businessman and consultant in the area of international finance and economic affairs, mostly in the US. He had married Jean d'Aprile, the daughter of a judge in Rochester, New York. They had four children. However, they separated in the late 1960s and were divorced in 1975. Orfila had maintained ties to former Argentine President and exiled General Juan Domingo Perón. After his return to Argentina, Perón became President again in 1973 and nominated Orfila as his Ambassador to the US in November 1973. Orfila's network of contacts in Washington DC made him a promising candidate for the succession of Galo Plaza Lasso, the outgoing Secretary General of the OAS. Orfila made his desire for the job known in an interview in *The Washington Post*. The election of a new Secretary General in May 1975 took seven rounds of voting. In order to head off a compromise candidate from Costa Rica during these rounds and to win more support from the region, Orfila offered to accept an Assistant Secretary General from Guatemala. Eventually he prevailed by a thin margin over Victor Gómez Bergés, the candidate from the Dominican Republic, receiving 13 votes to Gómez Bergés' nine votes and two abstentions. Orfila started his new career on 7 July 1975.

During his time in Washington as Ambassador and OAS Secretary General, Orfila was a great party-giver, known as probably the most wanted bachelor in town who also attracted much media attention. Tellingly he got to know his second wife, a former German model, while accompanying Jackie Onassis Kennedy at a gala in Washington's John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1976. His entertaining character helped him to address tricky issues at social gatherings, where he sought to negotiate deals. This was particularly important since he headed the OAS during considerably difficult times of confrontation between mostly right-wing dictatorships in Latin America and US President Jimmy Carter's administration favouring human rights. *The Washington Post* (15 April 1984) described him as 'persuasive and charming' behind the scenes, getting deals done, once he decided to prioritize them. Latin Americans, who disapproved his 'fiestas faraónicas' in light of the impoverished and the ongoing conflicts in the region, also criticized his role as party-host (*The Washington Post*, 25 October 1979). In his early time as Secretary General Orfila was said to have left an OAS dinner with human rights experts for an 'urgent' meeting that allegedly turned out to be 'The Playboy Girls of Washington' (*The Washington Post*, 15 April 1984). Within the OAS there were complaints that he threw dinners for his own business partners at the organization's expense, employed many Argentineans and ordered wine from his family's vineyards for organization events. However, as someone with a deep understanding of American habits, Orfila seemed to navigate smoothly in the treacherous diplomatic waters along the Potomac River. He showed concern about the decreasing morale of the staff and requested a study on OAS working conditions in 1980, but he also slimmed down the organization's bureaucratic apparatus in line with US wishes, replaced several of his predecessor's employees who were intimately associated with the Non-Aligned Movement and kept the budget stagnant during the last three years of his term. His objective was to get the OAS closer again to its most important member state and host country, the US. In the early 1970s there were rumours in US foreign policy circles of a move to abandon the OAS as it was regarded a decorative, useless and costly institution of consultation, with anti-American populism paid for by the US. Latin American diplomats occasionally criticized him for being 'too American' and having lost a

certain 'Argentine identity' (*The Times of the Americas*, 4 June 1980). Arguments were also made that he was less interested in improved inter-American relations and foremost served only himself.

Establishing to what extent Orfila contributed to the success of the Panama Canal Treaties and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' daring and mostly successful challenge of Latin American dictatorships is difficult, but it can be argued that he played along when there was a momentum and stayed out of a fight when he thought he could not win. Orfila was in the lucky position that the incoming administration of President Carter was eager to find an agreement with Panama about the Panama Canal, which had been built and operated under US control and was supposed to be handed over to the Panamanians. The strong message from the Carter administration to Latin America aimed at renewed hemispheric relations, with the OAS playing a role as the Washington-based oldest regional discussion forum for inter-American affairs. The OAS was not the driving force behind the Panama Canal Treaties, but Orfila managed to set the organization as the obvious venue for this improved hemispheric partnership. At the ceremonial signing of the treaties in the OAS main building on 7 September 1977 he sat between Panama's President General Omar Torrijos and US President Carter. Almost all Latin American heads of state were present, which caused some protests in the city because many of them were brutal dictators. However, the gathering at the OAS, preceded by an impressive reception hosted by Orfila the day before the signing ceremony, reportedly helped US diplomats to implore some Latin American governments to ratify the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights. Eventually even some very authoritarian governments ratified the convention, which as a result entered into force in July 1978.

Orfila's position on human rights in the Americas and the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights is difficult to assess, but according to interviews with diplomats and lawyers of the Commission at that time, he was in fact supportive of the Commission, which was created in 1959 and based on the 1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (Dykman 2004: 143). After the OAS General Assembly in Santiago de Chile in 1976 Orfila had been criticized for his appeasing comments on the hosting regime of General Augusto Pinochet, but in his speech in 1977 some weeks after the signing of the Panama Canal Treaties, called 'At the Turning Point: Freedom and Justice in the Transformation of the Inter-American System', Orfila stated that we 'must guarantee greater protection for the civil rights and liberties of individuals while avoiding the anarchy caused by political terrorism; formulate new international standards for the protection of economic and social rights of individuals' (Orfila 1978: 294). The quote illustrates his complex view of the notion of human rights. In Latin America, at least in rhetorical terms, economic, social and cultural rights have traditionally enjoyed more attention as rights than in the US. While he was said to show some sympathy with the Argentine Junta, which in 1976 took power with a bloody coup as reaction to increasing left-wing terrorism and carried out killings, torture and thousands of disappearances against suspected opponents, he seemed to soften his position by the end of the 1970s. He invited the Junta's foreign minister and the chairman of the Inter-American Commission to Washington in 1978 in order to facilitate a dialogue about an on-site visit by the Commission to Argentina. Eventually, the Commission was granted permission to conduct an investigation without restrictions in Argentina in the autumn of 1979, although the Junta had tried to limit the Commission's competences but had failed to do so due to increased pressure by the Carter administration. Orfila's interest in his re-election in 1979, thus a need for good relationships with the (mostly authoritarian) member states, may have influenced his position on human rights in general at the time and his role as mediator between the Inter-American Commission and repressive governments, particularly the Argentine Junta. While he was given some credit for smoothing relations between the Commission and problematic member states, other observers argue that he was also under pressure from the Carter administration in its promotion of human rights in the region (see Dykman 2004).

At the General Assembly meeting in La Paz, Bolivia in October 1979 Orfila was re-elected as OAS Secretary General for another five years by 18 to 7 votes over his challenger, Ramón Emilio Jiménez Jr., the Foreign Minister of the Dominican Republic. Orfila reportedly favoured the candidacy of

Valerie T. McComie from Barbados for the position of Assistant Secretary General to encourage the Caribbean states to vote for him, according to *The Washington Post* (25 October 1979). At the end of the meeting the government of Bolivia was overthrown in a military coup. With tanks in the street the next morning, Orfila was escorted to the airport by the military. Accused of having arranged for his own safety, but not for that of the staff, he denied that he had left them stranded (Romano 1982). Orfila's new term started on 7 July 1980. Even though the OAS under his guidance supported the Contadora Group in the early 1980s in order to mediate peaceful solutions to the Central American conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, the organization itself operated with passivity and limited impact, given the unilateral policies of US President Ronald Reagan, who had a different attitude towards Central and Latin America than his predecessor. The OAS was largely sidelined when the United Nations (UN) conducted later peace efforts in the region and similarly remained merely a forum of formal protests by Latin American states after the US invasion in Grenada, following a coup d'état in 1983. The situation was even worse in 1982, when Argentina attacked the Falkland Islands under British control. Argentina has traditionally claimed what they labelled as the Malvinas to be part of Argentine territory, whereas the United Kingdom (UK) argued that the islanders had not indicated a claim for change of British administration. The US sided with the UK and the events showed a strong relationship between US President Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, with the OAS generally ostracized during the conflict. That Orfila did not personally engage much in mediation efforts may be related to his wish to appear neutral as an Argentine international civil servant, but also to a potential future position in a democratic Argentine government. When the end of the dictatorship was looming in 1982 in the wake of the generals' defeat in the war on the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, Orfila was considered to be a candidate for the (transitional) presidency in Argentina (Romano 1982). He stated that he was not seeking the position, but gave the impression that he was open to others endorsing his potential candidacy. Previously he had also seemed interested in being considered as a candidate for the post of UN Secretary-General to replace Kurt Waldheim, since it was Latin America's turn to provide a nominee to lead the UN, but Orfila did not play a role in this context and the post went instead to Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, who took office in 1982.

At the General Assembly of the OAS in November 1983 Orfila unexpectedly announced his resignation as Secretary General eight months before his term would end. He expressed his sadness about the increasing irrelevance of the organization, mentioning the Falkland/Malvinas war, the US invasion in Grenada and the organization's weakness in view of the Central American conflicts. Orfila's tenure ended on 31 March 1984, with McComie taking over as Acting Secretary General until 20 June, when João Baena Soares from Brazil started as Orfila's successor. Orfila ended his nine-year tenure in a negative way, because it was revealed in early April that in January 1984 Orfila had started working for the newly created international division of the public relations firm of Gray and Company, which was led by Reagan-insider Robert K. Gray, and had received salaries from both this firm and the OAS. Orfila wrote that it had been a misunderstanding and offered to pay his OAS salary back, but since OAS regulations prohibit the Secretary General from holding outside employment and using the office for private gain, the Permanent Council decided after an investigation that Orfila had violated Article 124 of the Charter and the corresponding dispositions of the norms for the OAS executive head. The Council recommended to 'censure' Orfila's conduct and the General Assembly followed this recommendation. The media saw the incident as symptomatic of an irrelevant and inward-looking OAS. While Latin America struggled with public debt and the Reagan administration advocated a reconsideration of US funding to international institutions, the organization did not tackle regional security issues, but spent its time assessing the Secretary General's personal conduct. Orfila left the OAS disillusioned. He had headed the organization in particularly conflictive times and tried to have an impact but seemed increasingly disappointed by the organization's marginalized role, particularly after Reagan's electoral victory and the subsequent US move to unilateralism. It seems fair to conclude that Orfila used the chances offered during the late 1970s, but became frustrated and even disinterested in inter-American politics when the US withdrew its support and Latin American cooperation did not work. His interest as (transitional) president in a post-dictatorial Argentina, as

head of the UN or in more attractive business opportunities demonstrated his growing disenchantment with the OAS. In the end the sense of disillusion at Orfila's resignation from the organization seemed mutual between the Secretary General and the members of the organization.

Orfila returned to his work in consulting in international finance and real estate. In 1989 he and his wife moved to a stately home in Rancho Santa Fé, California. In 1994 he launched the Orfila Vineyard and Winery in the San Pasqual Valley in Escondido, California and became a member of the Advisory Board of the Wine Network Inc. Orfila's winery has won a multitude of international prizes, while he is portrayed as the winemaker who 'met presidents as diplomat' (Parente 2015). In 2013 the History Department of the California State University San Marcos chose Orfila as its first Distinguished History Maker and after a semester in residence at the university he was awarded the university's honorary doctoral degree of Humane Letters in 2014. Orfila has been decorated by the governments of a number of countries in Latin America, Europe and Asia.

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