

Texas on the Potomac

Washington news with a Texas accent

A tall Texan brought victims of Argentina's "dirty war" to international attention

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Towering Texan F. Allen "Tex" Harris says he repeatedly tried to right wrongs during a tumultuous 35-year foreign service career.

The straight-talking, 6-foot-7 former all-state high school basketball star tracked the "disappeared" during Argentina's "dirty war," battled transmission of the HIV virus in South Africa and spoke out on behalf of the atmosphere's imperiled ozone layer during Ronald Reagan's overhaul of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The 75-year-old retired diplomat, a Dallas native who winters in Galveston, says he has savored every moment of his chosen path as "a joyful contrarian."

"I made a career out of being a pain," says the graduate of Princeton and University of Texas law school. "My mother always said speak out and help people. It's just the way I'm wired."

The United Nations Association has honored Harris "for the use of diplomacy to advance human rights" during his pioneering efforts in the late 1970s to bring the missing victims of Argentina's junta to the attention of the State Department, the White House and the international community.

Harris' vivid, first-hand accounts were not always welcomed back in Washington, where many Cold War-era officials turned a blind eye to the military regime's gruesome campaign against left-wing "terrorists" rather than embracing the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights abuses.

"Tex risked his career and his life to tell Washington and the world what was happening," recalls Robert Cox, the former editor-in-chief of the Buenos Aires Herald. "His decision to take a stand ... saved lives and eventually led to the downfall of the dictatorship."

The military regime that seized power in 1976 and secretly killed at least 14,000 Argentineans was replaced by a democratically elected government after the junta suffered a humiliating defeat in its campaign to seize the Falkland Islands from Britain in 1983.

Skeletal remains of "los desaparecidos" _ the disappeared _ are still being unearthed in Argentina.

Harris' early efforts became "a point of hope for thousands of families whose children had been kidnapped, tortured and clandestinely executed by the military junta," said the citation for the award presented to Harris by the association's Washington, D.C. chapter. "Through his work he helped create a widespread world consciousness that international action was needed to confront such massive human rights abuses."



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For Harris, the balance between security and liberty remains just as crucial during the so-called war on terrorism as it did back in the 1970s in Argentina.

"Policy makers confronted with the threat of terrorism will overreact in favor of restricting liberties because of their fear of being seen as weak," Harris said. "American resources are so skewed _ we are spending almost 30 percent of the federal budget on defense and barely one percent on diplomacy."

Harris welcomed the honor, the latest in a distinguished career that has included two stints as head of the American Foreign Service Association, where an award for "constructive dissent and risk taking" bears his name.

The "cascade of justice" unleashed by unmasking the horrors of the regime's killings contributed to establishment of international standards for human rights that have empowered nations to make aid, trade and diplomatic relations contingent on nations' treatment of their own citizens, Harris told about 100 human rights activists who attended the award ceremony last week in the majestic caucus room of the House Cannon Office Building.

"Today a nation is judged by how it treats its own citizens, establishing a new norm in modern diplomacy," Harris said.

For all the recognition, the ebullient diplomat says he what really gets him excited is getting back to Galveston and stopping by Gaido's for the restaurant's signature dish of deep-fried oysters.

"I'm a regular," says Harris.

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