
Three Musketeers against an Army: An Interview with a Peruvian Journalist

CÉSAR HILDEBRANDT

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An Interview by Benjamin F. Moser
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César Hildebrandt is one of the most important journalists in Peru and is well known for his opposition to President Alberto Fujimori's regime. Born in Lima in 1948, he was educated in that city and in Madrid. The author of two books, Memoria del Abismo, a novel, and Cambio de Palabras, an anthology of his interviews, Mr. Hildebrandt is a former contributor to the magazine "Debate" in Lima and has also worked in Spain.

Through his current interview program, "Hildebrandt," and his former program "En Persona," he has become the most visible spokesman for a return to democracy. Along with Gustavo Gorriti, he was arrested in the aftermath of Fujimori's 1992 coup, which suspended constitutional freedoms and imposed press censorship. Mr. Hildebrandt, who has been a frequent target of death threats for his uncompromising commitment to civil liberties, moved to Spain after the coup and worked at the Madrid newspaper ABC until returning to Peru to lead the journalistic fight against Fujimori.

Journal: The Peruvian government has recently found itself in a better economic situation than any other government in the last fifteen or twenty years. Is this specifically due to Fujimori or to necessary changes that any government could have made?

Hildebrandt: The program of Alberto Fujimori is the program of [Peruvian novelist and 1990 Presidential candidate] Mario Vargas Llosa, but carried out without social compassion. The economic program is the same one developed in 1990 and is the same one that Mario Vargas Llosa had promised to put into practice, and the same one Fujimori had promised not to. It was common sense to leave behind populism and enter into a free-market economy, reconciling ourselves with the international economic community and formulating adjustment plans that were essential for the Peruvian economy, which was not competitive and which was stuck in all the old ideology of the Sixties. So the project of Fujimori is the common sense project for Latin America. But it is tied to or subordinated to an antidemocratic project, which is the sinister side, the dark side, of our Camelot.

Journal: Why are there so few people with anything positive to say about Fujimori?

Hildebrandt: What has happened is that Fujimori is like Nixon in 1973—he has bogged himself down in his own swamps, in his own secretions, in his own lies—and people have started to say that enough is enough. The Peruvian people have had a long honeymoon with Mr. Fujimori, but it is the typical story in which the wife discovers that the husband has three mistresses, not just one.

Journal: Javier Pérez de Cuellar has said that Fujimori lost his legitimacy in 1992, when he closed down the Congress. But that step was applauded by the people. Why has the situation changed now?

Hildebrandt: Because in the Peru of 1992 [when the government was fighting the Shining Path] the logic of civil war reigned. We were in the situation that Algeria is now in and, according to that logic, the war needed strong, Bonapartist, hard leadership that would resort to extreme measures and be extremely severe with terrorism—a state of emergency that created faceless judges, hooded attorneys, numbered cases, and nameless witnesses. And, of course, according to that logic, which was a logic caused by terrorism, the *coup d'état* which did away with parliamentary discussion was welcomed by eighty percent of the population, which applauded the suppression of traditional politics because the situation was extraordinary; but that wartime thinking, that civil-wartime thinking—we have lost that logic, it is now over, and what Fujimori does not want to understand is that the time for wartime thinking is over. We are now thinking about democratic construction, and he does not understand because he thinks his leadership is indispensable.

Journal: The event in Peru which was most publicized last year was the liberation of the hostages in the Japanese ambassador's residence. In contrast to the recep-

tion given the closing of Congress, the applause this time only lasted a few days. Was the liberation a good thing for Peru? It seems to have facilitated the ascension of several sinister people to power, such as [Intelligence Chief] Vladimiro Montesinos and many other members of the military. Was the occasion a bad augur for Peru, or was it a happy ending after all?

Hildebrandt: But I would have to be a disciple of Attila to say that it was a happy ending. How am I going to say that it was a happy ending when fourteen mistaken Peruvians involved with the guerrillas were killed, and when a judge and a brave army captain died—how am I going to be happy about that?

Journal: The operation saved almost all of the hostages.

Hildebrandt: Oh, well, then it's a question of a mathematics of death. I am happy from the point of view of the arithmetic of mortality, viewing the event viewed quantitatively. I am not happy because I am not a disciple of Attila. I am unhappy, first, because we are going back to the military thinking of 1992, and that is what Fujimori likes the most: the brutal, violent, "heroic" solution to conflicts. Second, the operation reinforced the civil-military alliance. Third, it reinforced the figure of Vladimiro Montesinos, the most sinister and thieving person of the entire regime. And fourth, it created the mirage for about two weeks of a Bonapartist president who made technical decisions and who was a kind of Mío Cid of the Andes. El Mío Cid de los Andes, no? It lasted two weeks and it disappeared, because mirages always disappear. It vanished because immediately after the event Mr. Fujimori understood that he should continue to demolish the state of law.

Journal: If a new leader were elected, someone truly democratic, would it be possible to re-establish the Constitution as it is written, with a real separation of powers, or is the Constitution already so undermined that there would have to be a new one?

Hildebrandt: There would probably have to be a new one, or this one would have to be modified. But what would have to be immediately done would be to reconstruct the attorney-general's office, the constitutional courts, the judicial power with all the magistrates, and then renew the Congress by converting it back into a bicameral one.

Journal: But with the damage the governmental institutions have received under the present regime, it would be a work of years, would it not?

Hildebrandt: Not of years.

Journal: Is the military is going to return to the barracks?

Hildebrandt: Yes, they will go back, because when we send them back to the barracks they will have to accept that their place is in the barracks and not in politics. And the same thing is going to happen to them that happened to the Paraguayan military with [President Juan Carlos] Wasmosy. Well, they are not going back yet because the candidature of [Paraguayan military leader] Lino Oviedo is not certain. [He has since been barred from running.] The same thing is going to happen to them that happened to the Sandinista Army in Nicaragua, which was so well entrenched. The same thing is going to happen that happened to the invincible Argentine military, which had to back out of politics.

Journal: But what if something happened in Peru, like another war with Ecuador or a comeback of the Shining Path—something to allow Fujimori and the military to convert themselves into Bonapartist heroes?

Hildebrandt: And who says that we would necessarily win a war with Ecuador?

Journal: The military themselves say it.

Hildebrandt: Well, the military is stupid enough to win a war in advance.

Journal: A navy officer I talked to said that in two days they would be in Quito. It seems that some members of the Armed Forces, especially General Nicolás Hermoza Ríos [who led the raid on the Japanese Ambassador's residence], are quite prepared for war.

Hildebrandt: But if there is no war.

Journal: If, hypothetically, there was anything that could influence the national mood, a little war, a little terrorism, like the conflict in 1995 in the jungle, which allowed Fujimori to foment a popular, militaristic mood?

Hildebrandt: But nobody wants war. Seventy-seven or eighty percent of Peruvians are against a war.

Journal: Some Ecuadorians are in favor of it to settle the problem of the border.

Hildebrandt: That's not right. In a recent poll, half of the Ecuadorians said they were against a military solution and the other half wanted an honorable exit for Ecuador in the negotiations. Nobody is stupid enough to want war.

Journal: Fujimori may see it as his only way out, or the military may see it that way in order to reinforce its position in the government. He could conceivably stay on for years if something like that happened.

Hildebrandt: If something like that happened he could *hope* to stay on for years, but I guarantee you that in the year 2000 there is going to be a different government in Peru; the military is going to abandon power and this sinister episode in Peruvian politics is going to be over.

Journal: Do you think Fujimori will leave when his term ends in 2000?

Hildebrandt: We're going to kick him out. He's not just going to leave.

Journal: He's already trying to run for a third term.

Hildebrandt: We are going to kick him out at the ballot box.

Journal: Do you think he will hold legitimate elections? We saw the scandals in the 1995 elections [against Javier Pérez de Cuellar] in which Fujimori interfered with his opponent's campaign, tapping his phones and resorting occasionally to fraud.

Hildebrandt: We only knew about the phone taps later—we didn't know at the time.

Journal: Do you think they could have affected the election's outcome?

Hildebrandt: I think Fujimori won legitimately in 1995, in spite of a lot of fraud that, shall we say, altered the results in the Congress, but on the Presidential level I think that Fujimori won legitimately. The candidature of Pérez de Cuellar was inadequate. And anyway, in 1995 Fujimori had not yet unmasked his real project, which he revealed later.

Journal: But there were indications, like the closure of Congress.

Hildebrandt: We've already said that the closure of Congress was applauded. But the Peruvian people kept on thinking the way they had been in 1992. 1995 was the year of change in Peruvian politics. Fujimori wins, and from that moment he begins to execute his project of destroying the rule of law, and only recently have the people said, "Oh, my God, who is this person we have elected a second time?" And this became more acute in 1996 and became a scandal in 1997.

Journal: So who still supports Fujimori?

Hildebrandt: His approval ratings are between fifteen and twenty-two percent. His clientele, his public is the poorest part of society, the least educated, the most illiterate, the most needy. This is his most stable electoral niche. Of course, these are the people he can approach and give water, a sewage system, a school—the people with whom he can play with the gift of grace from the shogun who gives things in the name of the nation, or, really, of himself. These are the people who do not abandon him. He, like everyone who has had a dictatorial project in Latin America, is nourished by ignorance: his sustenance is ignorance and his kryptonite is education.

Journal: His honeymoon is over, but why did it last so long?

Hildebrandt: Well, it wasn't that long. It was from 1990 to 1996, six years, which is a long time for a politician. But don't forget that we were recovering from the two great destroyers of modern Peru, [Shining Path leader "Presidente Gonzalo"] Abimaél Guzmán and [former President] Alán García [who was exiled after the 1992 coup].

Journal: How do you see your role as a television personality and as a part of the unofficial opposition, since you are not a politician? Is this role something you sought, or is it a product of chance?

Hildebrandt: No, it is not a coincidence. It is a solicited, sought-for destiny. I knew who Fujimori was as soon as he appeared in Peruvian politics in 1990 and when he won I went to Spain for three years and three months to work at the newspaper ABC in Madrid, because here all doors were closed to me: a political program of mine was canceled and the government was very strong. I didn't want to beg, so I left and eventually returned. And my role is a deliberate one; it is not an accident. I think that Fujimori, if he is allowed to, is going to convert Peru into an Asiatic satrapy, into one of the most corrupt governments in Latin America, and, moreover, into one of the most brutal governments in Latin America.

Journal: Do you see yourself as an opponent to the government first or as a journalist?

Hildebrandt: I see myself first of all as a journalist, but I don't proclaim my "objectivity." The world "objective" makes me laugh. Just like one couldn't be neutral in front of the nation when one learned of the break-in at Watergate, we cannot be neutral because we have a Watergate every day here. Every day there is a Watergate. One after another after another after another.

Journal: Last summer, there was a scandal surrounding the nationality of Fujimori when a Lima journalist, Cecilia Valenzuela, discovered documents appearing to indicate that the president was not, in fact, born in Peru. And the Congress voted not to investigate in spite of the evidence. Is that sort of thing frustrating for you?

Hildebrandt: No, because my battle is, in any case, based on public opinion, and public opinion is changing, not thanks to me but thanks to what goes on, and the perception the public has of those events. I am only a cable of electronic transmission—the government generates the electricity. I am only a cable; I only transmit. This is becoming an electric chair which is executing the Fujimori project—it is liquidating his project. Fujimori was lost with arrogance, haughtiness, and corruption. He thought he could use the military and now the military is using him. We keep on, keep on, persist, and hope that there will soon be another government to discover the dirt, the trash, and the filth behind this government. When we find all that out, Alán García is going to look like Little Lulu. When we discover, after 2000, what has been stolen in arms commissions; what has been stolen in secret reserve intelligence funds; when we discover how President Fujimori manages to pay \$90,000 for his children to study abroad, when he says he makes \$1,000 a month. When we discover all that, when we discover how Vladimiro Montesinos manages to make \$600,000 in one year without working, then Alán García is going to look like Little Lulu or Betty Boop next to what Mr. Fujimori is. Really, this is their fear: the fear is that it is going to be discovered in 2000—how many stones are we going to overturn in 2000! If you guarantee impunity to Fujimori, if you say that the first law of the year 2000 is going to be immunity, I am certain that he won't try to run again. If you sign and guarantee him that in 2000 the first law is going to be amnesty, he won't run again. He has no ideological program that he wants to accomplish. His obsession is not about doctrine. He is not obsessed with carrying through completely an IMF program so that no populist can change it. It is not a problem of doctrine—it's a personal problem. Susana Higuchi, his ex-wife [who divorced him publicly during his first term and threatened to run against him in the next election], told me a year ago that one of her children had said to her: my dad says that if you keep talking he is going to go to jail.

Journal: But at first everyone laughed at her.

Hildebrandt: Yes, until they realized that it wasn't worth laughing at her because everything she said, almost everything except for some very frequent conjugal embellishments, was completely true. But the most important thing is to recover our self-esteem. This government has injured the self-esteem of many people. Because it has forced them to accept the unacceptable.

Journal: You said that there would be no stone left unturned. Who is going to turn them over, if the press is more fettered every day? The case of Baruch Ivcher, the naturalized Peruvian owner of a popular anti-government television station, in which he was stripped of his property and his citizenship, has taught many people to beware. If Fujimori manages to get reelected, who will have the chance to prove all the accusations?

Hildebrandt: I am going to struggle for the continuation of my program, and of course Fujimori will do his best to make it difficult for us. But he has already lost the battle of public opinion. The only thing he has left is fraud.

Journal: He has not been particularly hesitant to use it, though: why not once more?

Hildebrandt: Yes, but we are going to have international observers, because this is not Bosnia or Burundi. Here, fraud has its limits. So what we are going to ask for a civil-vigilant presence of international observers. It will be run like the elections in Nicaragua, in which *sandinismo* lost, thanks to international vigilance. Here, there is an enormous vocation for fraud, but we are going to all the international organizations, and what we have said is that we hope that the Organization of American States behaves itself, and that [former Colombian president and OAS head] Cesar Gaviria behaves decently—I know that we are asking too much, but with outsiders observing, maybe it will be different. We hope Jimmy Carter will bring his observers. We hope they come in and watch the polls.

Journal: Where do the press and the opposition find themselves after the Ivcher incident? Do you think that the average Peruvian cares about the situation or do you think that the government chose an easy target?

Hildebrandt: If you look at the polls you will realize that at least in Lima, which is a racial mosaic of all of Peru, eighty-one percent of people condemn the seizure of Mr. Ivcher's property. I don't think that Mr. Ivcher is a Martian for the average Peruvian. They know that the government took away Channel 2 from a man. What was his name? It could be López, it could be Ivcher, but the act has been understood for what it was.

Journal: Is the judicial branch so castrated that it could not react to such an obvious miscarriage of justice?

Hildebrandt: The judicial branch swallowed the expropriation because it is dominated by the executive. Here there is no separation of powers. The Congress is

dominated by Fujimori. The judicial branch is dominated by Fujimori. The attorney-general, Peru's Janet Reno, is a servant of Fujimori. Here, most of the press is subservient to the government, because they owe it a great deal and a great deal more. So here there is no attorney-general, no judicial branch, and, finally, they got rid of the constitutional tribunal, and by removing three of its justices it is now useless. So here they got rid of Montesquieu and the Enlightenment: here there is no separation of powers. This is a hyperconcentrated government. What is the only native power that challenges Fujimori's absolute control of Peru? This program, "En Persona." The newspaper *La República*. The magazine *Caretas*. No one else. No one. We are three musketeers.

Journal: But three musketeers with a good deal of influence.

Hildebrandt: Yes, but we are three musketeers against an army. Because the fourth musketeer, the most important, was Baruch Ivcher, and they already killed him. And his program ended.

Journal: And public opinion?

Hildebrandt: Yes, of course, but we are still three. Maybe next year there will only be two of us. But it doesn't matter, because Fujimori is losing the battle of public opinion.

Journal: What is he going to do in the next two years? We have already seen that he has not hesitated to use the dead bodies of teenagers in the ambassador's residence as electoral propaganda. What is he capable of?

Hildebrandt: Of everything. He could do anything. He has no limits. You ask me where he will end up. If there were justice, if Latin America were a continent in which justice worked, where politicians had strength and courage, he would have to be where Pinochet should be. In jail.

Journal: But Pinochet didn't go to jail.

Hildebrandt: Exactly, for that reason. That is why I said that if Latin America had courageous politicians, and if this were a democracy, Fujimori would have to end up in prison after 2000. In prison. For being caught up in murders. Because Fujimori was involved in the killings in Barrios Altos. The proof is that the truck that part of the commandants used to kill sixteen civilians in Barrios Altos was registered to Santiago Fujimori, his brother and advisor. He gave the go-ahead for those killings.

Journal: Pinochet probably killed a lot more people than Fujimori did, and he is still very powerful in Chile.

Hildebrandt: Yes, you are entering in a mathematics of murder. Duvalier killed more people, Hitler even more, and Stalin still more.

Journal: But if we are talking about Latin American leaders who have done similar things, we must keep Pinochet in mind when we ask if it is possible that Fujimori will be punished.

Hildebrandt: If we have the *cojones*, it is possible.

Journal: Who does have the *cojones*, if there are only three voices in Peru against an army?

Hildebrandt: Well, three journalistic voices. Besides that there are strong unions, there are congresspeople who are getting together, there are mayors and councilmembers in the provinces who are fighting. But don't think this is an urban fight, in Lima, of three journalists. People are circulating petitions for the referendum against a third term: they are fighting too.

Journal: Are those people powerful enough against the army—which also has reason to fear its crimes being discovered?

Hildebrandt: But the army has not committed the crimes. Only a few leaders. The military leaders are the ones who will be tried. If we have no possibility of prosecuting criminals, we don't deserve to change governments. We need to create special courts to judge the crimes. Simply. The Congress will have to be in the center of the investigation. And those who are guilty will have to go to jail. That's all.

Journal: The story of the faceless judges who have convicted people here during the period of Shining Path terrorism, for example, is still current. The authorities are only now liberating people unjustly convicted of crimes of "treason" ten years ago. So, how far does justice reach in Peru?

Hildebrandt: The justice of this regime does not reach anywhere. But established and democratic justice reaches to the point that in Spain they are trying the Argentine military.

Journal: But that is for crimes committed against Spaniards.

Hildebrandt: Of course, if it is the Spanish judicial system it protects Spanish citizens. But the arm of justice is long, and with an international police, yes, it is possible. If we have a little courage it is what we are going to do. If we lack courage, like the Chileans lacked it, then we won't. The Chilean democracy lacked the courage to say that their democratic transition was not a gift. They won that transition. And there was no court in Chile, because the opposition accepted the 1989 constitution, which was the constitution of Pinochet.

Journal: But the Chilean army was much more powerful than it is in Peru, even now. Perhaps it will be easier to do here than in Chile.

Hildebrandt: You think that we Latin Americans are second or third class citizens, that we don't deserve to have democracies. Just now you asked, How is something possible that is possible in your country? How is something possible that in other countries is possible? You consider us a kind of inferior race, and think that we have to accept murderous soldiers, corrupt judges, genocides. No, no, no we don't. We are not an inferior race, although you sometimes think so. We are not. We are first-world citizens in terms of values. I know as much about Aristotle as you do. I know as much about Roman law as you do. I feel as Western as you do. And in the name of this global village, which is not only Bill Gates selling his software but universal democratic values, I tell you that yes we are capable of getting rid of murders and putting them in prison. We are not an inferior race. We South Americans are not a bunch of Indians who have to accept what you don't accept. I'm speaking of what should be done. And what should be done is what can be done when we have principles and courage. Because if we don't do it, then we sink into the mud. And we will have no moral authority to tell them to change. But I guarantee you, and I beg you to understand me, that we are not second-class citizens in Latin America. We look like it, but we aren't.

Journal: Who do you think will be the leader of this transition? Who would be the best man to lead Peru out of this situation?

Hildebrandt: I don't know. The movement has not yet produced its leader. There is still not a consensus. It is a vast movement which includes a lot of people: the parties, [Lima Mayor] Alberto Andrade, the journalists who are fighting—but there is not a definitive figure yet. It is an advantage for Fujimori. Obviously, an advantage that the alternative leader has not yet emerged.

Journal: But Alberto Andrade has seventy percent in the polls.

Hildebrandt: He would be a great candidate, but he would have to be convinced—

until now he has only wanted to be mayor. But he will have to be convinced, even imposed upon, like a duty. But as for the crimes, I repeat, we are going to fight until the bitter end for the criminals to go to prison. And the first intellectual author of crimes in this country is named Alberto Fujimori. If we are not able to try Fujimori and his group, presided over by Vladimiro Montesinos, then we have no right to call ourselves citizens. It is a high-stakes game. The Chileans didn't understand that. And now they have this link to a supervised democracy, run by the military, which has power in the senate. And the majority is in favor of giving a Senate seat to Pinochet, because it is controlled by the right. The Chilean Christian Democrats accepted this, and they are now paying the price. The Chilean government looks ridiculous now. But based on this experience, we don't want to pay that price. So, let the military go back to the barracks. And some—only some—to prison. And the military institution will be respected. No one wants to change it. But those who are implicated in drug-running; illegal currency exchange; illegal running of contraband, with international drug cartels, like those of Cali, Medellín, or Guadalajara; murders; complicity in murders; or intellectual authorship of murders; or thefts in “commissions” for arms purchases—those people will have to pay.

Journal: What would you think about establishing here a tribunal like the South African Truth Commission, directed by Desmond Tutu, in which many criminals are exhorted to confess their crimes and receive a very light punishment, if any?

Hildebrandt: That is a solution for South Africa. I don't like it for one reason. In New York, there has been a drop in crime in the last four years because Mayor Giuliani decided that there was no impunity. Not even for people who urinate in the streets — not even for them. He decided that crime must be punished. And I think that crime must be punished. And the authors of genocides should be punished. With the same logic, Radovan Karadzic could apply for amnesty. All the Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian criminals could ask for the same thing. Why did we have the trials in Nuremberg? There cannot be a crime against humanity that remains unpunished. There cannot be amnesty for political crimes, committed from a position of power, deliberately. Because what South Africa is doing, which comes out of the goodness of South Africa, will have a high price in the future. Because once Mandela is dead, once he loses his charisma, once he loses his ability to convince and to unite South Africans, then there will be many other problems. Because impunity produces more crimes. There is nothing worse than impunity. The sensation that if I commit a crime, and then am pardoned, just for having admitted it—and sometimes without even admitting it! Winnie Mandela never admitted her crimes! She didn't even admit them!—this kind of impunity is the worst thing that can happen to a country.

Journal: But if you have as many criminals in South Africa as you did in Nazi Germany, you can't punish everyone. So there has to be a solution.

Hildebrandt: But it isn't everyone. That is what they always try to make people believe. The Peruvian Army is full of honest and honorable people who need to drive taxis in order to feed their families. There are colonels who drive taxis because they receive such low salaries. Those who robbed are forty. Those who have killed are thirty. With seventy people you have resolved the problem. Crime is individual, not institutional. The same in South Africa. You think all the police killed people? No, only some chiefs. Crime cannot remain unpunished—that is a sub-Saharan definition of justice, let's forget the past. No! We don't want to forget. We don't want the Argentine forgetfulness, the Uruguayan forgetfulness, the Chilean forgetfulness: that is cowardly forgetfulness of frightened democracies! Who is going to explain Vladimiro Montesinos's money? Let's see him explain in 2000 how, according to a program on Canal 2, "Contrapunto," he received unbelievable amounts compared to the salary structure of this country. Well, that's what it's all about. It's about how Peru can, in 2000, teach Latin America a lesson about a reconstructed, renewed, courageous, humane democracy. But one that doesn't forget. Because the greatest problem of Latin America is the role given to military. The armed forces of Latin America are the worst disgrace of this continent. Much worse than drug traffickers, much worse than urban violence. The armed forces of Latin America think that they can interfere in the government simply because they have arms, which is the most tribal, most ancient, most primitive concept of power. I have spears, so I have votes. My power depends on my tanks. The day in which the armed forces in Latin America reduce themselves to national guards or disappear, as they did in Costa Rica, is the day in which Latin Americans will have freed ourselves from the greatest cross our democracies carry. This is a concept for the future, a philosophy for development in the future. The armed forces are the worst of this continent, in Cuba, in Uruguay, in Argentina, in Peru, in Ecuador, in Colombia: they are always the explanation, everywhere, of violence, of corruption, of threatened democracy. Democracy does not destroy itself by itself. There is not a single exception in Latin America, starting with Cuba, where the military is not or has not been the bulwark of the most brutal institutions of Latin America. In Cuba, there is a communist dictatorship; in Nicaragua, what was the Sandinista dictatorship. We know what happened in Chile. So, my dream, if I have a dream, is a Latin America in which the armed forces have either disappeared or been reduced to a national guard. But that must wait for the future, and implies a pacified continent with well-marked borders and a more mature political class.

Journal: Dr. Hildebrandt, thank you for this interview. 