

Operation Condor

US holds key evidence against Pinochet

Bill Vann**31 October 1998**

Officially, the Clinton administration has taken the position that the detention of Gen. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte in London is a matter that concerns only the Chilean, British and Spanish governments. It has made bland statements about supporting the prosecution of human rights violations, while acting as if the case against Pinochet had no more to do with the US than with China or India.

Those seeking to bring the former Chilean dictator to trial for crimes against humanity believe, however, that Washington holds crucial evidence needed prosecute him. Spanish magistrate Baltasar Garzon approached Washington last year in an attempt to persuade the Clinton administration to open secret Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation files relating to the Pinochet regime's state terrorist apparatus and, in particular, its overseas operations.

The request was renewed last week following Pinochet's detention in a London hospital. In addition to the request from Spain, a group of US Congressmen, led by John Conyers of Michigan and George Miller of California, asked the Clinton administration to turn over the records, couching their plea in a statement stressing the need for international cooperation in the struggle against 'terrorism.'

The White House, the CIA and the FBI have not been swayed by these appeals. Washington continues to keep secret what is unquestionably the largest source of documentation on the mass killings, torture and state terror carried out by the Pinochet dictatorship during its 17-year rule. The reasons for the continued secrecy are obvious. Top US officials, living and dead, are directly implicated in these crimes.

Much of Judge Garzon's case against Pinochet is centered on Operation Condor, a secret agreement between the security forces of at least five Latin American dictatorships to cooperate in a war of extermination against left-wing and working class opponents of

imperialism and military rule. Garzon's brief against the former dictator reviews the killings of Spanish citizens and those of other nationalities carried out in Chile as well as in Argentina. In some cases, refugees from the bloodbath unleashed by Pinochet in 1973 were kidnapped, tortured and either executed or returned to Chile to be killed after the Argentine military took power three years later. Death squads made up of Uruguayan fascists also played a leading role in these operations.

Operation Condor was formally launched in October 1975, when Gen. Manuel Contreras brought together representatives of the intelligence agencies of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil in Santiago and forged an agreement to set up a joint 'information bank' and 'task forces.' These operated for years across national boundaries, spying on, hunting down, torturing, and murdering citizens from all of these countries.

This transnational apparatus of state terror has deeper historical roots, however. The links between Latin America's military commanders and dictators were forged in places like the US Army School of the Americas and other military schools in the US itself. The ideology that united them was the anticommunist 'national security' thesis propagated by the Pentagon and the CIA.

In 1968, Gen. Robert W. Porter, the head of the US Southern Command, spelled out the strategy for combating social revolution in Latin America that would ultimately take the form of Operation Condor: 'In order to facilitate the coordinated employment of internal security forces within and among Latin American countries, we are ... endeavoring to foster inter-service and regional cooperation by assisting in the organization of integrated command and control centers; the establishment of common operating procedures and the conduct of joint and combined training exercises.'

Among the Operation Condor victims cited in Garzon's indictment of Pinochet is the Swiss-Chilean student Alexei Vladimir Jaccard. Abducted off the streets of

Buenos Aires in May 1977, he was taken to a police station and then to the infamous torture center at the Navy School of Mechanics, from which he 'disappeared.' The Swiss government has asked the United Kingdom to hold Pinochet as it prepares charges over this case.

Others were seized in various parts of Argentina and sent back to their deaths in Chile. In one of the most macabre joint operations between the two military commands, the bodies of 119 people abducted in Chile turned up in Argentina carrying phony documents. The Argentine security forces tried to pass the victims off as people who had been killed in inter-party strife in Argentina.

The reach of this state terror network extended well beyond Latin America. Its most famous act was carried out on the streets of Washington in 1976. Orlando Letelier, the minister of defense and foreign affairs in the deposed government of President Salvador Allende, had escaped to the US, where he was carrying out a public campaign to isolate the Pinochet dictatorship. On September 21, 1976, Letelier and his 25-year-old American aide Ronni Moffet were killed when a bomb ripped through the car in which they were riding.

One Michael Vernon Townley, a US citizen who spent his youth in Chile, where he established ties to the semi-fascist Patria y Libertad movement, organized the killing. Townley returned to the US in 1970, going back to Chile only after the 1973 CIA-backed coup. He returned with skills as an electronics and bugging expert and joined the Chilean secret police, DINA.

The assassination in Washington was not Townley's first operation. In 1974 he had organized, together with Argentine secret police and extreme right-wing political activists, the assassination of Gen. Carlos Pratts, the former Chilean military chief of staff who had opposed the coup. A year later he went to Europe hunting down opposition political figures. In 1975, working with Italian fascists, he organized an assassination attempt on Christian Democratic leader Bernardo Leighton, who, together with his wife, was shot in the head. Both suffered severe wounds, but survived the attack.

In the aftermath of the Letelier assassination official Washington claimed to have no knowledge as to who was responsible. George Bush, then the head of the CIA, assured the FBI that the Chilean DINA had nothing to do with the killings, citing as his authority his many close contacts in the Chilean agency. Both the CIA and DINA planted stories in the media suggesting that Letelier had been targeted by extreme left-wingers who wanted to

make him a martyr.

There is ample evidence that the CIA, at the very least, had advance notice of the assassination plot and was thoroughly familiar with Townley and his accomplices, who were drawn from the same anti-Castro exile circles that the agency used in its operations against Cuba, as well as its covert actions in the Congo and later in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Ultimately the trail of evidence led to Townley. The Chilean regime was forced to extradite him to the US in 1978.

In return for fingering his Cuban henchmen and naming DINA commander Col. Manuel Contreras as the man who ordered the killings, Townley was given a reduced sentence. Subsequently he was provided with a new identity and government cover under the Federal Witness Protection Program. His testimony is being sought by the Spanish judge, but Washington has no interest in making him available.

Bush himself would be a likely person to call to the witness stand. There are obvious questions to pose: Was Townley an agent or asset of the CIA? What role did the agency play in Operation Condor's international exploits? Why did Bush himself organize a cover-up for the assassins?

Any trial of Pinochet for the repression and killings that occurred throughout the southern cone of Latin American in the 1970s would inevitably produce an indictment of US imperialism and the methods it employed to defend the interests of American banks and corporations against the threat of social revolution. It would quickly become evident that leading political, intelligence and military figures from Bush to Henry Kissinger to Richard Helms belong in the dock alongside the aging dictator.

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