

Washington's silence on Pinochet

Bill Vann
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Nearly two months after the arrest of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in London, the US government has yet to publicly declare its attitude toward the detention of the ex-Chilean dictator and the advisability of his being extradited to Spain to be placed on trial for crimes against humanity.

Several European governments have declared their backing for such a trial, and some--France and Switzerland, for example--have sought Pinochet's extradition as well, demanding that he be tried by their courts for the murder of their citizens. The Clinton administration has expressed no such desire.

The State Department's spokesman James Rubin declared recently that Washington is 'not prepared yet to state our views about the legal merits' of the case for Pinochet's extradition. 'We continue to study the opinions.'

The one explicit statement on the Pinochet affair has come from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who expressed US concern for 'democracy and the rule of law in Chile.' She continued: 'I think we believe that in Chile the citizens of a democratic state are wrestling with a very difficult problem of how to balance the need for justice with the requirements of reconciliation. I think significant respect should be given to their conclusions.'

This was tantamount to a declaration of support for the position of the Chilean government that Pinochet should be released and sent back to Chile. While the US media has remained largely silent on the matter, the press in Europe has widely reported that the State Department is conducting an aggressive intervention with the British government to achieve this end.

No examination is made by the media on either side of the Atlantic of precisely what the terms 'democracy' and 'reconciliation' mean in the Chilean context. It is reconciliation between the Pinochet dictatorship's assassins and the relatives of their victims, between the torturers and the tortured. It is a 'democracy' that accepts that the military stands above all laws and can commit mass murder of civilians with impunity. In short, it is the acceptance of a society in which the ruling class holds a club over the heads of the workers, threatening to bring it down again whenever political or economic developments pose a threat to its wealth and power.

This is the 'democratic' state that the Clinton administration is determined to preserve. Similar regimes exist throughout Latin America, where the transition from military juntas to governments headed by civilians has been equated with the advent of democracy. In all of them, amnesty and 'punto final' laws have been enacted that ensure the preservation of military establishments trained and equipped by the United States. These laws protect the military from any legal retribution for mass

executions in stadiums, the torture of hundreds of thousands of people, the theft of children from mothers and fathers who were put to death, and countless other acts of brutality directed first and foremost against the working class.

Of all the world's governments, that of the US has one of the clearest cases for demanding the extradition and trial of the butcher of Santiago. Aside from US citizens Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi, who were executed by the Chilean military during the Pinochet-led coup of 1973, Pinochet's regime was responsible for the only political assassination on the streets of Washington known to have been ordered and carried out by a foreign power.

In 1976 a car bomb planted by the US-born Chilean intelligence agent Michael Vernon Townley took the lives of Orlando Letelier, the exiled former minister of the government of Salvador Allende, and that of his American aide, Ronni Moffit. Townley confessed to the crime, as well as to other political assassinations and attempted assassinations of opponents of the Pinochet regime from Rome to Buenos Aires to Mexico City. In return for implicating a group of anti-Castro Cubans, veterans of previous CIA operations, and for fingering Colonel Manuel Contreras, the chief of Chile's secret police, the DINA, Townley was given a reduced sentence and a new identity under the federal witness protection program.

Contreras, who was sentenced to a prison term in Chile in an attempt to close the books on the case, testified that all of his actions were carried out on the direct orders of Pinochet.

Washington has consistently demanded the extradition of those it accused of ordering or carrying out acts of terrorism that claimed the lives of US citizens, even on foreign soil. It succeeded in bringing to the US for trial foreign nationals charged with carrying out the bombings last August of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Saalam, even though the great majority of the victims of the attacks were not US citizens. It was not about to leave the matter in the hands of the Kenyan or Tanzanian courts. Similarly, it has long demanded the extradition of Libyan citizens that it claims were responsible for the 1988 bombing of Pan American Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

In 1989 the Bush administration carried out an invasion of Panama, seized the head of state, Manuel Noriega, brought him back to the US, tried him on charges of drug trafficking and put him in prison.

So why does the US have no interest in bringing such a prominent practitioner of international state terrorism as Pinochet to justice?

Preservation of the present political setup and military establishment in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America is no doubt a serious concern. But there is an even greater disincentive for

Washington to stage its own trial of Pinochet. Present and former US officials would find themselves in the dock with the former dictator.

Three prominent figures could immediately be called to testify and face possible criminal charges:

* Henry Kissinger, who said of Chile in 1970 that he did not see why the US had to 'let a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people.' After failing to prevent the election of Salvador Allende, Kissinger ordered the CIA to embark on what was known as 'Track II,' the preparation and execution of the military coup that brought Pinochet to power and led to the death, torture and imprisonment of tens of thousands of Chileans.

* Richard Helms, who received Nixon's orders to 'save Chile,' and received what he described as a 'marshal's baton' to carry out whatever covert operations he saw fit to bring down the Allende government.

* Gen. Vernon Walters, the former deputy director of the CIA, who brought his Chilean counterpart, Colonel Manuel Contreras, head of the DINA, to Washington in August 1975 for wide-ranging discussions. Walters, a fanatical anticommunist, is credited with coordinating the Brazilian military coup of 1964. He remained an active participant in US counterrevolutionary operations in Latin America and elsewhere under the Reagan and Bush presidencies. It is hardly conceivable that he would not have reviewed the Pinochet junta's involvement in counterrevolutionary repression and acts of state terrorism outside of its borders, carried out under the code name Operation Condor. There is every reason to suspect that Helms, Walters and others in the CIA sanctioned, if not directly supervised, these operations.

* George Bush, who took over the CIA in 1976, reconstructing the agency after the damaging revelations that emerged around the Watergate crisis. Bush's role in carrying out damage control at the agency undoubtedly involved covering up the CIA's role in the crimes of the Pinochet dictatorship.

There are doubtless hundreds of less prominent present and former US officials, intelligence agents and military officers who also played a role in the Chilean coup and the subsequent crimes of the Pinochet dictatorship.

The State Department recently said the US was preparing to declassify 'as many documents as possible' relating to Pinochet's crimes. It is certain that whatever material is released will be carefully vetted to eliminate all references that could reveal 'methods and sources' of the CIA and other US agencies. In other words, material will be either censored or withheld to prevent identification of American officials and the CIA's intelligence 'assets' in Chile who directed repression in that country.

It is noteworthy that in documents released thus far, next to nothing has appeared about the assassination of Letelier and Moffit. Michael Vernon Townley, meanwhile, remains under government protection, his identity and whereabouts a closely guarded state secret.

There is a still broader concern on the part of the US government. It fears that the extradition and trial of Pinochet could set a dangerous precedent for the detention, extradition and trial of US officials accused of crimes against humanity, from Vietnam, to Central America and the Persian Gulf.

Washington has brayed the loudest about coordinating international efforts against 'terrorism' and has frequently demanded the extradition of opponents of US foreign policy whom it defines as a terrorists. Yet the Clinton administration reacted with hostility to the formation last summer in Rome of a permanent tribunal on war crimes and crimes against humanity. It refused to join 133 other nations in signing the treaty that created the court after it failed to secure guarantees that no US official could ever be brought before it.

In a recent comment on Washington's attitude toward the Pinochet affair, the *Washington Post* stated that many government officials 'have been hostile to Pinochet for a quarter-century' and that 'no one in the administration sympathizes with the former general.'

No doubt many, like Clinton himself, who entered politics in the period of the antiwar protests of the 1960s and were hostile to the Nixon administration during Watergate, have long considered Pinochet anathema. Whatever their past views and feelings of revulsion toward the Chilean general, however, these former liberals have become his staunchest defenders.

Cloaking their struggle to free the ex-dictator in rhetoric about Chilean 'democracy' and 'reconciliation,' their aim is to cover up the past crimes of US imperialism and defend Washington's ability to carry out future acts of counterrevolutionary repression, wherever the vital interests of the American ruling class are threatened.

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