

Clinton's selective declassification

Chile documents expose criminal role of US foreign policy

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The Clinton administration's release of some 5,800 documents relating to the 1973 military coup in Chile has provided a glimpse of the murderous role of US foreign policy in Latin America and internationally.

No major US newspaper or broadcast media outlet has conducted any serious examination of the documents. Outside of a few cursory news reports on the day of their release, the declassification has been treated by the American media as a non-event having to do with the distant history of a foreign land.

The White House has itself asserted that its principal aim in declassifying the formerly secret material is to further the process of "truth and reconciliation in Chile," as if the bloody events there 25 years ago had nothing to do with the activities of the US government outside of its innocent collection and storing of reams of cables, memoranda and secret intelligence reports on the carnage that took place there.

In reality, the documents—though clearly the most incriminating material remains locked in the secret archives of the CIA and the Pentagon—shed significant light on Washington's crimes against the Chilean people. They further illuminate US complicity in the murder, torture and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, students and others seen as real or potential opponents of the military dictatorship and American interests.

The Clinton administration initiated the release of the documents at the end of May largely as a damage-control operation. Mounting international attention has been focused on the Chilean events by the ongoing legal wrangling over Spain's demand for the extradition of the former dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, who is in British custody. Legal arguments over General Pinochet's crimes have inevitably touched upon Washington's involvement in the military coup that brought him to power in 1973 as well as in his subsequent reign of terror.

With Pinochet's detention the White House also faced renewed demands from the families of Americans killed in the repression, including Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi, who were among those rounded up and executed in the National Stadium in Santiago.

Whatever the motives of the White House, the thousands of documents chronicling Washington's role in organizing and supporting one of the most horrific bloodbaths of the twentieth century comprise an incontestable refutation of the democratic pretensions of US foreign policy. Coming at a time when the Clinton administration portrays its military intervention in the Balkans as a matter of the US standing up to the repression of a ruthless dictator, these papers confirm once again that US imperialism has not only defended its interests precisely through such regimes, but has served as their principal sponsor in Latin America and internationally.

Significantly, the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which had the most intimate involvement in the 1973 coup and the closest

working relations with the Pinochet dictatorship's security apparatus, supplied only a fraction of the declassified material, just 490 documents between them.

The lion's share came from the State Department and the rest from the Justice Department, the FBI and the presidential libraries of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.

Notwithstanding the extreme selectivity of the CIA in determining which of the massive number of documents on Chile were fit for release and its blacking out of incriminating material in even these files, this material still provides a glimpse of the intimate relations that existed between the agency and the butchers of the Chilean military.

One declassified cable sent September 8, 1973 from the CIA's Santiago station to the Directorate of Operations in Washington spelled out in detail the plans for the coming coup. The name of the agency's informant was blacked out. According to this document, the Chilean Navy had decided "to begin an action in Valparaiso ... to overthrow the Government of Salvador Allende" and that "the Air Force will support this initiative." It goes on to state that General Gustavo Leigh, the commander-in-chief of the Air Force, "has made contact with Gen. Pinochet, commander-in-chief of the Army, who has told him that the Army will not oppose the Navy's action."

The cable from the CIA's operatives in Chile said that their informant "believes that the Army will join the coup after the Air Force supports the Navy." The cable concludes that the coup will take place on September 10 "or at least during the week of Sept. 10." On that day, the CIA mission sent a new cable to Washington providing more specific information: "The coup attempt will begin on Sept. 11. The three Armed Forces and the Carabineros are implicated in the action. A declaration will be read on Agriculture Radio at 7:00 a.m. on Sept. 11."

Significantly, the documents released by the CIA only deal with the intelligence reports coming from Chile to the agency's Langley, Virginia headquarters. They show that US officials had the closest working relations with the coup plotters. What the CIA failed to release was the cable traffic going the other way, those providing instructions to its operatives in Chile. For good reason these documents remain classified. They would incriminate US officials, active and retired, from Henry Kissinger on down, potentially exposing them to the same fate of detention and extradition now confronting the aging Chilean dictator in London.

The documents also make clear the full US knowledge of and backing for the orgy of killing and torture that followed the military coup.

One September 1973 message sent by the US Embassy in Santiago to Washington relays a request from the Pinochet dictatorship for help in setting up concentration camps for tens of thousands of political prisoners, and US "advisers" to assist in operating them.

While acknowledging "obvious political problems" in openly offering such aid, the memo suggests that Washington could pursue a back channel approach and "may wish to consider feasibility of material assistance in form of tents, blankets, etc. which need not be publicly and specifically earmarked for prisoners."

That there was no confusion as to what Washington was supporting in its aid to Pinochet was made clear by a CIA cable sent in October 1973. It described the Chilean dictator as the leader of the "hard-line generals," continuing, "The hard-liners believe that the extremists or the Marxist activists should be summarily executed, while the moderates think that they should be tried, sentenced and that they should attempt to rehabilitate them."

A declassified letter addressed to Kissinger in early 1974 from the then US Ambassador to Chile, David Popper, also spelled out the real relations between Washington and the Chilean regime. "I have invariably taken the line that the US Government is in sympathy with, and supports, the Government of Chile, but our ability to be helpful ... is hampered by US Congressional and media concerns ... with respect to alleged violations of human rights here."

A secret cable sent in 1974 gives a precise estimate of the number of political prisoners held by the regime, supplied to the CIA in a briefing by Chile's interior minister and the head of the Directorate of National Intelligence, or DINA, the regime's secret police. It said that 30,568 people had been detained for political reasons, including thousands held secretly because "they are part of sensitive, ongoing security investigations." These secret detainees were Chile's "disappeared," abducted by the military, tortured and then dumped, some alive and some dead, from aircraft into the sea or over the isolated snowy peaks of the Andes.

The declassified documents are significant as well for both what was included and excluded relating to the most notorious crime carried out by the Chilean dictatorship on US soil.

On September 21, 1976 a bomb ripped through a car in which Orlando Letelier, a former cabinet member in the Allende government, was riding in the center of Washington. The powerful explosive device killed both Letelier and an American colleague, Ronni Moffitt.

Samuel Buffone is an attorney for the Letelier family who has worked on the case since shortly after the assassination. He called upon the Clinton administration to release documents relating to the killing that have been reportedly declassified but are still being held back on the grounds that they are the subject of an ongoing Justice Department investigation. This rationale for withholding the sensitive material was the first announcement that such a probe was taking place.

Buffone said the Letelier family wants the documents turned over to Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon, who is pursuing the prosecution of the former Chilean dictator.

The attorney charged the US with withholding any serious assistance from the Spanish prosecutors. "If it had been the reverse, if the treatment that the US has given Spain in the case of Chile had been given by Spain to the US, there would have been a scandal here," he said. "Documents requested more than two years ago haven't even been sent, nor have they yet been able to take a statement from one of the principals in the case, the DINA [Chilean intelligence] agent Michael Townley," he said.

Townley, an American expatriate, was extradited from Chile in 1978 in an attempt to deflect charges concerning Pinochet's own role in the killing. He confessed to having organized the Letelier assassination on orders from DINA chief Manuel Contreras. After being tried and convicted in connection with the assassination, Townley plea bargained for a reduced sentence and protection from prosecution for crimes committed outside the US. He confessed to participating in the other assassinations and attempted assassinations in Argentina, Italy and Mexico. After serving just five years of his sentence, Townley was released into the US witness

protection program, and given a new identity and protection by the US government.

There are also undoubtedly good reasons for Washington withholding the most significant files about the Letelier-Moffitt case. What limited documents have been made public point to the US government having been forewarned of the assassination plans and providing at least its tacit approval.

Among previously declassified documents were the minutes of then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's trip to Santiago in June 1976. While the ostensible reason for visiting the Chilean capital was to attend the annual meeting of the Organization of American States, Kissinger used it to hold private talks with the General Pinochet.

The State Department memorandum on the meeting reported that Pinochet expressed his concern to Kissinger about an international campaign being waged by opponents of his government, and in particular by Chilean exiles residing in Washington. Twice the dictator mentioned Orlando Letelier as a man who had to be stopped.

Kissinger voiced his agreement that Chile was the victim of an international leftist campaign. "The United States sympathizes with what you are trying to do here," he said.

While privately expressing support for the savage repression unleashed by the Chilean regime, the Secretary of State was publicly affirming that the human rights situation in Chile had improved dramatically.

Another of the recently declassified document, dated August 16, 1976, originated from State Department operatives in Latin America. It gave detailed information on "Operation Condor," which involved the security forces of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia in a joint campaign to violently suppress "subversives" operating both within their territories and abroad.

The document explicitly warned "that the governments are planning and directing assassinations within and outside the member countries of Operation Condor has very serious implications that we most confront directly and rapidly."

At the same time the memorandum expressed US support for "coordination between the various countries of the Latin American Southern Cone in relation to subversive actions in the region."

Within barely a month of this document being sent, Letelier and Moffitt were dead. While the US government was well aware that Letelier was a principal target of Chile's Murder Inc., it made no attempt to either protect or even warn him.

The assassination in Washington followed the killing of Gen. Carlos Prats in Buenos Aires in 1974 and the assassination of the Christian Democratic leader Bernardo Leighton in Rome in 1975.

After the Letelier-Moffitt assassination, then-CIA Director George Bush gave assurances that the Chilean regime was not involved in the killing. Government officials leaked stories to loyal media hacks attributing the killings to a dissident leftist faction.

Both the documents that the Clinton administration has chosen to release, as well as those that it determined must still be kept secret, demonstrate the continuity of a US foreign policy founded on violence and oppression. In Chile 25 years ago, just as today from Latin America to the Balkans, Washington is prepared to employ both military barbarism and police-state brutality to ensure the profit interests of the US banks and multinationals.



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