

CIA documents confirm: Chile's secret police chief worked for Washington

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Confirming what opponents of Chile's two-decade-long military dictatorship had long charged, the Central Intelligence Agency has issued a report to the US Congress acknowledging that the head of the DINA, Chile's hated secret police, was a paid agent and informer of the CIA.

Gen. Manuel Contreras is currently jailed on a Chilean military base for his role in planning the September 1976 car-bomb assassination of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and his US aide, Ronni Moffitt, on Washington's Embassy Row. At the time, the report establishes, he was a trusted "asset" of the US spy agency.

As head of DINA (the Spanish acronym for Directorate of National Intelligence) Contreras oversaw a network of clandestine detention centers where tens of thousands were killed or tortured in Chile itself. He also dispatched death squads abroad to hunt down and murder opponents of the regime in Argentina, Mexico, Italy and the US.

The CIA established its intimate relations with Contreras from the time he was named DINA head by Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet in early 1974, just months after the US-backed military coup toppled President Salvador Allende. These ties continued until the secret police chief was forced to resign from the Chilean military because of international furor over the Letelier assassination three years later.

The CIA report, issued in compliance with Congressional legislation, claimed that the US agency had urged Contreras "from the start" to refrain from human rights abuse. It adds, however, that CIA officers in Chile recommended "a paid relationship" despite considering him "the principal obstacle" to improving human rights in Chile. The CIA now claims that it rejected the proposal and that it issued only one payment to the secret police chief as the result of a "miscommunications" between the headquarters in Langley, Va., and the Santiago station.

While Contreras was invited to Langley twice to meet with CIA spymaster Gen. Vernon Walters, there is little in the report detailing the nature of the relationship between Washington and the Chilean general.

The report also acknowledges that the US used its relationship with Contreras to obtain information about the infamous "Operation Condor," a joint collaboration between the dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil to locate and assassinate exiled opponents of those regimes. Significantly, however, the agency makes no claim that any of this information was used to foil murders and attempted murders of political dissidents, including the assassination of Letelier and Moffitt, the worst single act of international terrorism to take place in the US capital's history.

The admission that Contreras was on the CIA payroll goes beyond confirming long-standing accusations that Washington abetted and helped cover up for this vicious political murder. As the operation was planned and ordered by an agent and informant of the CIA, there is ample reason to suspect that the agency played an active role in the killing itself.

In 1993, Contreras and his aid, Pedro Espinoza, were tried in Chile for their role in organizing the Letelier assassination and sentenced to seven and six years respectively. Speaking from his military prison, Contreras described the CIA report as "revenge" on the part of the agency for his having provided documents to the FBI.

Further, the former general insisted that the CIA, rather than the DINA initiated the Letelier assassination. So too, he said, it was the CIA that ordered the murder of Carlos Pratts, the former commander-in-chief of the Chilean army, and his wife in Buenos Aires, as well as the attempted murder of ex-vice president Bernardo Leighton in Rome.

"Letelier's Institute of Policy Studies was considered a Marxist institute, even the FBI had infiltrated it,"

Contreras said in a newspaper interview. “But the CIA could not act within the United States; it could only act through foreigners. So they killed him and put the blame on us.”

The CIA report also confirms the close (and paid) relations between the agency and another group of right-wing Chilean assassins who murdered Gen. Rene Schneider in 1970 for opposing calls for a military coup. The CIA paid the group \$35,000. The cash, the report said, was offered “in an attempt to maintain the previous contact secret, preserve good will and for humanitarian reasons.”

In Chile, the revelations in the report sparked calls by government officials and human rights advocates for Contreras to be tried on charges of treason.

In Washington, meanwhile, the Clinton administration and the CIA continue to hold back reams of classified documents on US relations with the Pinochet dictatorship on the pretext that their release would compromise intelligence sources and methods. While the administration has released thousands of documents in the last 16 months in a belated response to the demands of Spanish prosecutors following the indictment of Pinochet and his detention in London, the most incriminating material has been withheld. Both the Directorate of Operations, the CIA's most secretive department, and US military intelligence have refused to declassify cables, memos and reports that record the concrete relationships between the US spy agency and the Pentagon on the one hand, and those who directed the death squads, “disappearances” and torture centers in Chile on the other.

There are very good reasons for the reluctance to make this material public. If a Spanish court can indict Pinochet for crimes against humanity, what is to stop it or the judiciary in another country from indicting former US officials like Henry Kissinger, George Bush, Gen. Walters and others, once the evidence detailing US involvement in these crimes is released?

From even the limited amount of documentation released thus far, there is no doubt that CIA and Pentagon archives contain substantial material demonstrating that these individuals and the administrations they served were direct partners with the Chilean secret police. Such documents would reveal their complicity in the mass repression and murder in Chile and coordinating the joint operations of the secret police agencies of the Latin American dictatorships in eradicating exiled dissidents.

As one recently released secret document makes clear,

“Operation Condor” included in its participants the US secret police as well.

The document is a letter written in 1975 by Robert W. Scherrer, the FBI's man in Buenos Aires. Addressed to Gen. Ernesto Baeza Michaelson, the Director General of Investigations of the Chilean political police, it concerned the arrest in May of that year of a Chilean leftist, Jorge Isaac Fuentes, as he crossed the border from Argentina into Paraguay.

As Fuentes, a sociologist and member of the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left), was subjected to repeated interrogations and torture by the Paraguayan police, Scherrer acted as the conduit for information extracted through this brutal process.

He informed his Chilean contact that among the information obtained from the captured leftist was a list of addresses in the United States of sympathizers and supporters of the dictatorship's opponents. “The FBI initiated an investigation in the United States concerning the aforementioned people and addresses,” he wrote. “I will inform you of the results of the investigations as soon as I have them in-hand.” The released document deleted the names and addresses of those in New York, Dallas and Puerto Rico placed under surveillance.

The Chilean secret police had Fuentes transferred to a detention center in Santiago. There his torture continued until he ultimately “disappeared.”

Thus, while the CIA claims it was collaborating with Contreras to ameliorate “human rights” in Chile and obtain information about “Operation Condor” and its network of international repression and assassination, the FBI was actively involved in a “Condor” operation centering on the torture and subsequent murder of a political prisoner.

This documented episode merely provides an example of the working relations between US police and military agencies and savage dictatorships that ruled much of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. Established by military officers trained and aided by Washington, and advised by the Pentagon and the CIA, these regimes acted as defenders of US financial and corporate interests in the region while relentlessly repressing the aspirations of the working class and rural poor.



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