

Chile's arrest of Pinochet and the "Condor" killers in the US

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The indictment and arrest of Chile's former dictator Augusto Pinochet Monday for the killings and disappearances of political opponents carried out under his rule has provoked no comment from the US government and relatively little attention in the American mass media.

Yet the trail of evidence against the retired general, whose 17-year rule saw the murder, torture and imprisonment of tens of thousands of Chileans, leads directly to Washington's doorstep.

It was reported this week that a Chilean judge following this trail has managed to secure an evidentiary hearing in the US capital in which two of the participants in the infamous Operation Condor assassination program will be questioned. Both have been living in the US for decades under the protection of the American government.

It is not just these assassins who are implicated, however. Top US officials—both current and former—share Pinochet's criminal responsibility for the mass murder carried out in Chile and elsewhere during the period of Operation Condor.

The particular charges against Pinochet pertain to the abduction of nine individuals and the murder of one. The victims were Chilean exiles who were grabbed by security forces in neighboring countries, turned over to the Chilean secret police, the DINA, and thrown into concentration camps and torture centers, never to be seen again.

The cases are drawn from those of many hundreds if not thousands of people who were liquidated as a result of the agreement forged in 1975 between military intelligence and secret police officials of six Latin American dictatorships—others would join later. In their social and political background, as well as their fate, they are representatives of the tens of thousands of people murdered by these regimes within their own borders over the course of the 1970s.

Chilean prosecutors have said they chose Condor as the focus of their charges because it would be impossible for the ex-dictator to claim that he was not responsible.

Judge Juan Guzman, who is leading the prosecution, reportedly has evidence that Pinochet personally participated in the November 1975 meeting in Santiago, Chile—formally titled the First Inter-American Meeting on National Intelligence—where the multinational alliance of state terror was forged. Present were top military and police officials from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia and Paraguay.

Just as it would have been impossible to initiate such an operation without Pinochet's involvement, such a meeting could not have been launched without the approval of the US government, which actively supported the military coups that brought these dictatorships to power.

Declassified US documents have made it clear that Washington was fully informed about Operation Condor from the start. It knew of plans to carry out killings of exiled political dissidents and, at the very

least, did nothing to stop them.

There is ample reason to believe that it was not just a question of tacit approval. The US government itself was involved in multiple assassinations and assassination attempts in the 1960s and 1970s, a period when the CIA was commonly referred to as Murder Inc. It had trained the majority of those involved in Operation Condor at the US Army's School of the Americas, then based in Panama. And it had CIA and military advisors working intimately with the military and secret police forces throughout Latin America.

Henry Kissinger, who was Richard Nixon's national security advisor and then secretary of state, was the principal US architect of the Chilean coup. When the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende was elected in 1970, it was Kissinger who commented, "I don't see why we need to stand idly by and let a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."

From the day of Allende's election in September 1970, Kissinger was directing the conspiracy that ultimately led to the Chilean president's overthrow and death and the bloodbath that was unleashed against the Chilean people. Washington's actions closely resembled those that would be carried out by the Pinochet regime under Operation Condor just a few years later.

Before the Socialist Party president was even inaugurated, the Nixon administration allocated \$10 million to overthrow him. US efforts initially resulted in the assassination of the country's chief of the army, General Rene Schneider, who opposed a military coup. The aim was to blame the killing on supporters of Allende as justification for the military seizing power. The guns used in the killing were supplied by the CIA, which subsequently paid some \$35,000 to the assassins. In 2001, based on newly declassified documents confirming Kissinger's role, Schneider's family filed a lawsuit charging the ex-secretary of state with responsibility for the general's death.

The same batch of documents declassified during the waning days of the Clinton administration made it clear that Washington was intimately familiar with Operation Condor and the plot to carry out assassinations outside Latin America and took no action to stop its execution.

The best known of these killings took place in Washington itself. Orlando Letelier, the former foreign minister of the Allende government, had emerged as the most prominent figure lobbying for the US to break relations with the dictatorship on human rights grounds.

On September 21, 1976, he was killed by a remote-controlled bomb that ripped through his car as he rode through a section of the US capital known as embassy row. The blast severed both his legs, and he bled to death. An American aide, Ronni Moffit, was hit in the throat

by shrapnel and drowned in her own blood.

The CIA and State Department knew immediately that the assassination had been organized by the Chilean dictatorship. From the first, the US government sought to cover up the role of its ally, Pinochet.

George H.W. Bush, the current president's father, was then director of the CIA. Although the agency had overwhelming evidence that the killings were the work of the DINA, it fed a cover story to the media that they had been carried out by "left-wing extremists" in an attempt to discredit the Pinochet regime.

Thus, *Newsweek* wrote that "the Chilean secret police were not involved" in the assassination. It said the CIA had come to this conclusion because "the bomb was too crude to be the work of experts and because the murder, coming while Chile's rulers were wooing US support, could only damage the Santiago regime" (*Newsweek*, October 11, 1976).

Justice Department investigators and federal prosecutors received no cooperation from the CIA in pursuing an investigation into the killings. Yet voluminous evidence led them to two DINA agents—Michael Townley and Armando Fernandez Larios.

These are the two individuals that the Chilean judge is now coming to question. Townley was extradited to the US in 1978 and served only five years in prison. Fernandez came in 1987 and was sentenced to just five months. Both of them were placed in the US witness protection program, provided with new identities, financial support and security by the US government.

The judge is pursuing a separate case against Pinochet over the 1974 assassination of General Carlos Prat and his wife in a Buenos Aires car bombing. Townley confessed to making that bomb, as well as the one that took the lives of Letelier and Moffitt.

Based on his testimony, the former head of DINA, Colonel Juan Manuel Contreras Sepulveda, was convicted and sentenced to prison in Chile for the Letelier assassination, and convicted in Argentina of organizing the Prat assassination. Contreras, a paid "asset" of the US Central Intelligence Agency, has insisted that all of DINA's operations were undertaken on the orders of Pinochet.

Townley, the son of the American director of Ford Motor's operations in Chile, became involved with an extreme right-wing Chilean organization. He reportedly approached the CIA, offering to work in Chile on its behalf. The agency claims it did not accept the offer, a standard answer in the case of covert operatives. Whether Townley was acting solely on behalf of the DINA, or was working with the CIA as well, remains an open question. The protection he has received from Washington would suggest the latter.

The connections with the CIA do not stop there, however. In carrying out the assassination in Washington, Townley recruited a team that consisted of right-wing anti-Castro exiles who had worked closely with the CIA in carrying out armed attacks on Cuba. They provided the explosives and manpower for the car bombing.

A key figure among these Cuban exiles was Guillermo Novo Sampol, who first gained fame with a bazooka attack on the United Nations headquarters in New York City in 1964. He was convicted of first-degree murder, conspiracy and other charges in the Letelier case and sentenced to 40 years in prison. The verdict was subsequently overturned on procedural grounds.

In November 2000, Novo Sampol was arrested together with three other Cuban exiles for attempting to assassinate Fidel Castro at the Ibero-American summit meeting in Panama. One of his co-conspirators was Luis Posada Carriles, a CIA-trained Bay of Pigs

veteran, who was previously charged in the 1976 terrorist bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 people. Carriles later played a key role in the Iran-Contra network in Central America, maintaining direct ties to then Vice President Bush.

At the end of last August, the outgoing Panamanian president pardoned the four men arrested in the Castro murder plot. The pardon came the day before a Miami campaign rally for President George W. Bush, who refused to condemn the freeing of four convicted terrorists.

Three of these terrorists, including Sampol, returned to Miami to a tumultuous welcome from prominent right-wing Cuban exiles, who were then playing a key role in Bush's Florida election campaign.

There is another connection between the present administration and these assassins that bears investigation. Porter Goss, installed as CIA director in September, joined the CIA as a covert agent in 1962, working out of its Miami station and participating in the US attempts to overthrow Castro. In that capacity, he forged close ties to the Cuban exile terrorists who provided the manpower for the Letelier assassination. In 1970, Goss officially left the CIA.

It appears that Pinochet may finally be brought to trial in Chile. One obvious question is why he has never been placed on trial in the US itself. There is ample evidence to indict Pinochet in a US court as the principal author of what constituted—before September 11, 2001—the worst act of terrorism carried out in Washington's history.

There has been no such indictment because the US government in general, and leading figures in the current administration, in particular, are implicated. They deserve to be indicted as well for the mass killing, repression and torture that were carried out in Chile and throughout Latin America in the 1970s.

Henry Kissinger belongs in the dock alongside the Chilean dictator, and is already the subject of an extradition order from a Chilean court. He remains a prominent figure in the affairs of the US ruling establishment and is protected by the government. In 2002, the Bush administration attempted unsuccessfully to name this war criminal as the head of the "independent" panel investigating the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

George Bush senior should be the subject of an indictment for the role the CIA played under his direction in fostering and covering up for the assassination squads that roamed Latin America and, ultimately, the streets of Washington.

The most prominent figures in the Bush administration—Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—are likewise implicated. Cheney was the White House chief of staff during the Condor Operation, while Rumsfeld was defense secretary, supervising US ties to the Latin American military.

What emerges from an examination of the connections of the current administration to the case of Augusto Pinochet is that those who are ostensibly prosecuting a "global war on terrorism" are themselves implicated in criminal acts of state terror.



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