Mourning for Pinochet: US establishment shows its affinity for fascism

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If the political events of the past six years have demonstrated anything, it is that there exists within America's ruling establishment no genuine commitment to democratic rights or democratic forms of rule. In the relatively short period since 2000, the US ruling elite has overseen the theft of a national election, the launching of an illegal war, the abrogation of the most basic constitutional rights and the legalization of torture.

This week's death of the aged former US-backed Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet has provided one more verification of this general political trend.

While in Chile itself, the death of an individual who exercised a reign of terror for 17 years sparked spontaneous celebrations—tinged by deep regret that he was allowed to die in a military hospital rather than in the prison cell he so richly deserved—within the most influential layers of America's corporate and financial elite, his demise was the occasion for both mourning and tributes.

The editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, for example, carried an editorial Tuesday entitled "The Pinochet Paradox." The paper's editorial board, which generally reflects the right-wing views within the Bush White House itself, cautioned its readers that Pinochet's "real story is more complicated" than that of a military dictator who abolished liberties.

The editorial is laced with gross distortions and outright lies. It claims, for example, "The popular notion that the US sanctioned the coup or condoned Pinochet's torture hasn't held up under historical scrutiny." On the contrary, documents released by the Clinton administration (though the most incriminating evidence from the CIA and Pentagon still remains classified) make quite clear that the US government was fully informed of plans for the September 11, 1973 coup—as well as the killings and torture that followed—and fully supported it. Moreover, they confirmed the role of the Nixon and Ford administrations in seeking to quell international criticism of the barbaric regime established by Pinochet.

The *Journal* goes on to advance a back-handed argument that the coup was justified in any case. "Contrary to mythology [Chile's Socialist Party President Salvador] Allende was never a popular figure in Chile."

By 1972, the *Journal* claims, the Allende government had itself become repressive, threatening "to jail journalists," a false charge that was first floated by the CIA as part of its destabilization campaign. In fact, the right-wing press, which the CIA helped fund and write, remained free to carry out provocations up until the coup itself.

The editorial also condemns Allende for "shortages and spiraling inflation" under his government, conditions that were due in large measure to the Nixon administration's stated intention to "make the economy scream" in order to facilitate Allende's ouster. Credit and exports were cut off, while money was poured in to provide covert aid to business-organized strikes that crippled sectors of the economy.

"The official death toll of the Pinochet dictatorship is some 3,197," the *Journal* states. "An estimated 2,796 of those died in the first two weeks of fighting between the army and Allende-armed militias."

Really? How many army personnel died in this "fighting"? According to most credible estimates, a total of 33 people died on the day of the coup itself, less than half of them military or police personnel, some of whom were shot for refusing to support the army's action. The thousands upon thousands who died afterwards—and most credible estimates put the number killed at anywhere between three and ten times the official count—were abducted, tortured and murdered in concentration camps and secret prisons without ever being charged, much less tried.

There was no "fighting" beyond the most scattered and unequal acts of resistance precisely because Allende had rejected demands by the most militant sections of Chilean workers for arms.

By willfully distorting these facts, the *Journal*'s editors justify and sanction mass murder and torture. Of course, the editorial acknowledges that "Civil liberties were lost and opponents tortured." However, the *Journal* continues, "over time, with the return of private property, the rule of law and a freer economy, democratic institutions also returned."

There may have been "dark times," but today, "What remains is a Chile that has the healthiest economy in Latin America..." In other words, the bloodbath and barbarism unleashed upon the Chilean people was well worth the effort.

Similarly, the *Washington Post* carried a Tuesday editorial headlined "A Dictator's Double Standard," with the subtitle,

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"Augusto Pinochet tortured and murdered. His legacy is Latin America's most successful country."

This piece likewise seeks a "balanced" approach, while deriding the ex-dictator's critics. "For some he was the epitome of an evil dictator," the editorial states. "That was partly because he helped to overthrow, with US support, an elected president considered saintly by the international left: socialist Salvador Allende, whose responsibility for creating the conditions for the 1973 coup is usually overlooked."

While acknowledging that thousands were killed, tens of thousands tortured and hundreds of thousands exiled, the *Post* quickly adds, "It's hard not to notice, however, that the evil dictator leaves behind the most successful country in Latin America." It credits Pinochet for "free market policies" that produced "the Chilean economic miracle."

What is the nature of this "miracle" that they all celebrate? For the likes of the well-heeled and self-satisfied publishers and editors at the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, Chile is a miracle because they can stay at five-star hotels, eat at gourmet restaurants and visit upscale shopping malls in Santiago, while earning handsome returns on investments in Chilean stocks.

Conditions of life for the masses of workers and poor who inhabit the slums outside the circle of skyscrapers and luxury housing reserved for Chile's rich and their foreign counterparts, as far as they are concerned, are beside the point.

This myth of the "Chilean miracle" and the supposed credit due Pinochet for laying foundations—built with the blood and bones of his tens of thousands of victims—for a free-market renaissance are repeated ad nauseam by virtually every section of the mass media.

According to government statistics, over 20 percent of Chile's population lives in poverty. But this official count does not include retired workers and the disabled subsisting on woefully inadequate pensions; many think the real poverty rate is closer to 40 percent.

The country ranks as one of the most socially unequal in the world. This is the real legacy of the Pinochet regime and the reign of terror it unleashed against the Chilean working class. Between 1980 and 1989, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population saw its share of the national income climb from 36.5 percent to 46.8 percent. During the same period, the 50 percent of the population at the bottom of the income ladder saw their share plummet from 20.4 to 16.8 percent.

In the aftermath of the coup, Chile saw the steepest fall in real wages and sharpest increase in unemployment ever recorded in Latin America. The dictatorship ushered in social conditions for working people that can only be compared with those that prevailed during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Between 1974 and 1975, the unemployment rate more than doubled from 9.1 to 18.7 percent. By 1983, the country was plunged into economic freefall, with nearly 35 percent of the workforce jobless and manufacturing down by 28 percent. These desperate conditions sparked a new wave of working class struggles that were ruthlessly repressed, with tens of thousands rounded up again.

The vast transfer of social wealth from the working class to a financial and corporate oligarchy affected by the dictatorship took the most brutal forms. By the time Pinochet surrendered the presidency, the average diet for the poorest 40 percent of the population had fallen from 2,019 calories a day to just 1,629. Meanwhile the percentage of Chileans left without adequate housing had risen from 27 to 40 percent.

The "miracle" was granted to the wealthiest layers of society along with the military and its political cronies. They enriched themselves through the plundering of the working class and state property. Wholesale privatizations were carried out without any rules or scrutiny, in what amounted to a vast robbery of social resources. Pinochet's personal participation in this corrupt process has come to light in the form of some $27 million squirreled away in secret overseas bank accounts.

Under the constitution dictated by Pinochet, the government has been barred from even investigating this orgy of corporate criminality—what the *Wall Street Journal* sanctimoniously refers to as "the return of private property, the rule of law and a freer economy."

High unemployment, low wages, high interest rates and a workforce compelled to labor at the point of a gun meant super profits for both domestic and foreign capital, at the price of hunger and poverty for millions. This is the "miracle's" material substance.

Those who pen editorials using such end results to justify rounding up tens of thousands of workers, intellectuals, students—men, women and children—subjecting them to unspeakable torture and summarily executing them in soccer stadiums are themselves fascists in all but name only.

The defense of Pinochet and the "balanced" approach to torture chambers and military firing squads taken by the US establishment media constitutes an unmistakable political warning.

The emergence of a mass movement of the American working class capable of challenging the monopoly over wealth and political power exercised by the financial oligarchy will be met with similar methods. If the corporate and financial interests that rule America were to see themselves losing power to a socialist party committed to ending the subordination of society to private profit and the accumulation of vast personal wealth, they too would search for a fascist general prepared to carry out slaughter on a far greater scale than in Chile.

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