New documentary on Pinochet's dictatorship: Some wounds should not heal

Debra Watson
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The Judge and the General tells the story of recent efforts to bring to justice the perpetrators of horrific acts of political repression committed three decades ago under Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet. In their documentary, co-directors Elizabeth Farnsworth, a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) correspondent, and Patricio Lanfranco weave together historical film footage and poignant and informative interviews with individuals victimized by the regime and those who have fought for justice for the victims.

Both filmmakers were in Chile in the early 1970s. The military coup against democratically elected president Salvador Allende occurred on September 11, 1973, and began with the shelling of the presidential palace in Santiago by the military plotters. Allende, the long-time leader of the Socialist Party, was killed.

The film has been shown at various film festivals in the US and in Latin America and aired on PBS's "POV" in August.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, thousands of individuals were killed or disappeared in an unprecedented campaign of criminal terror by the Chilean army and police. The country's intelligence service, DINA, formed under the dictatorship with the assistance of the American CIA, directed a massive campaign of arrest, torture and murder against opponents of the military regime.

Under Operation Condor or Plan Condor, military leaders from several Latin American countries, including Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, coordinated arrests and assassinations of their citizens. When the persecuted fled Latin America, operations were planned and carried out in European cities and in the US.

Lawyers for the survivors of the government-directed terror campaign and the surviving families of the dead and disappeared pursued criminal actions against hundreds of government officials. These actions escalated after charges were filed against junta leader Augusto Pinochet in January 1998. Pinochet died in hospital in 2006, effectively mooting his indictment and the scores of charges against him. At the time of his death, 497 agents of his government had been indicted in Chile and 30 convicted. Two hundred more indictments were filed in 2007.

The Chilean court had assigned Judge Juan Guzmán to preside over the Pinochet case, and the film follows some of the ensuing investigation by Guzmán and detectives under his direction, with contemporaneous footage of efforts at gathering evidence.

One of the first witnesses called by Guzmán was journalist Monica Gonzalez. She was asked to provide information on an audio tape she helped to circulate that included a September 11, 1973, communication between Pinochet and Vice Admiral Caraval. Gonzalez, who was herself jailed under the dictatorship, plays a conversation in which Pinochet confirms that Allende should be offered exile, but with a catch. "We maintain our offer to get him out of the country, but the plane falls in midair. If you get rid of the bitch you get rid of the litter," Pinochet is heard saying.

Lawyer Eduardo Contreras offers an explanation of the extraordinary brutality of the dictatorship toward large sections of Chilean society. Everyone who offered the slightest support for Allende's government or for civil and social rights became targets of the regime. The purpose was "to create a climate of terror."

Interviews with survivors of the Chilean torture centers are chilling. The Caravan of Death was a convoy organized in the early days of the regime that traveled the length of Chile. The regime concentrated on exterminating the most prominent people to multiply the effect of their terror methods on the general population. University professors, union leaders, student leaders and members of political parties, including officials of the Allende government, were murdered and disappeared.

Some of the cases investigated by Guzmán are featured in the documentary. Manuel Donoso was a 23-year-old professor of sociology when he was killed. From the lone detainee who escaped the truck that carried Donoso, Guzmán learns that his fellow prisoners were shot point-blank by military forces.

An account of the torture typically inflicted on the population is related in emotional testimony by Maria Cecilia Rodriguez. One of Rodriguez's captors, Osvaldo Romo, tells his story from a prison in Santiago, where he is currently confined. In a matter-of-fact voice, he details his methods. These included attaching electrodes to the breasts and private parts of his detainees and applying electrical shocks.

Pinochet maintained that all the "excesses" carried out against civilians were unauthorized actions by subordinates. When that argument began to fall apart, Pinochet's supporters claimed that he was too ill to stand trial. In 2000, British Home Secretary Jack Straw cited this excuse to overrule the House of Lords and turned down Spain's extradition request. This allowed Pinochet to escape prosecution in Spanish court for crimes against humanity.

Guzmán admits that he himself nearly ended his efforts to prosecute Pinochet in Chile for the same reason. He says he finally decided to prosecute only when Pinochet defiantly appeared in an interview with a Miami television host and clearly demonstrated that he was not suffering from dementia.

A startling revelation in the film is the estimate by Guzmán that more than 10,000 habeas corpus petitions filed for the missing or disappeared since the 1970s had been rejected by the Chilean courts. Guzmán confesses that during his investigation he found his own handwriting on some of the denials that he had written up for his superiors' signatures while working as a young judge.

The commendable effort of the filmmakers to showcase some of the

thousands of individuals who have battled against the criminals of the regime provides a valuable service of widening awareness of the junta's bloody history. Unfortunately, the role of the US government in the repressive police and military machinery in Latin America under Pinochet is not explored.

Astonishingly, there is no mention of Guzmán's attempt to interview Henry Kissinger as part of the investigation into the death of Charles Horman, an American journalist killed by the junta's secret police after the military coup.

Kissinger, then President Richard Nixon's national security advisor, was the principal US government architect of the coup in Chile. When Allende's Popular Unity government was first elected in 1970, Kissinger 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." Current Vice President Dick Cheney and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have also been implicated. Bush's father, former President George H.W. Bush, was head of the CIA at the time.

Investigative reporter John Dinges, an American who lived in Chile in 1974, tells the filmmakers that he has documents showing that the CIA dispatched agents to Chile for three months to assist in training operatives for the infamous intelligence service DINA.

Dinges publishes much more evidence of the US role in his own book, *The Condor Years*, published in 2004. He writes in the first chapter: "The political tragedy of this story is that the military leaders who carried out the assassinations and mass murders looked to the United States for technical assistance and strategic leadership."

Peter Kornbluh, author of *The Pinochet File*, also appears several times in *The Judge and the General*. Both Dinges and Kornbluh are connected to the National Security Archives, a non-governmental organization at George Washington University dedicated to publishing documents released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Co-director Elizabeth Farnsworth explains her motivation for centering the film on Guzmán's investigation during an interview that followed the episode of "POV," which showcased the documentary. She tells her audience that she wanted to shed light on moral questions related to "the theory of the good German." Her concern involved answering the question, "How can people who mean to do good do so bad?"

She has singled out Guzmán's soul-searching about his initial blindness and silence in the face of the mass persecution and his subsequent bravery in standing up to right-wing Pinochet supporters in modern Chile. While Guzmán's evolution may be interesting, this type of moralizing weakens the film and avoids the critical issues.

Allende was not killed because he was a socialist—he was not. But he was anathema to vested capitalist interests in Chile and to American imperialism because he advocated a certain measure of protected national development. In any case, his threats to redistribute land and nationalize foreign concerns were never implemented in the three years his government was in power. The Popular Unity government demoralized and demobilized the working class and the oppressed rural population, created illusions in the supposed "democratic" propensities of the armed forces and opened the door to the military butchers.

At the time of the coup the International Committee of the Fourth International issued a statement "Defend the Chilean Working Class," which condemned the atrocities being committed by the junta and called for an honest examination of political events in Chile. The statement explained that the ICFI had warned of the threat from the right. It stated: "In September 1972, Allende dismissed any prospect of a military coup: 'I believe my government is the best guarantee of peace. Here there are elections and freedom. Ninety percent of Chileans do not want an armed confrontation.'

"The remaining 10 percent, however," the ICFI statement warned, "did not share Allende's Stalinist illusions. New groups like the semi-fascist 'Freedom and Fatherland front' began openly to arm against the regime while the landlords in the south created private armies to impose summary 'justice' on peasants."

The ICFI explained: "Every stage in the Chilean catastrophe was determined by the crisis of working-class leadership, the bankruptcy of Stalinism and Chilean social democracy. This bankruptcy was expressed in an absolute refusal to expropriate totally the Chilean capitalists and a complete prostration before the capitalist state dressed up as the defense of '100 years of congressional democracy in Chile.' "

The outlook of the filmmakers dovetails with the policy of current Socialist Party President Michelle Bachelet and her predecessor, Socialist Party president Ricardo Lagos. During Lagos's administration at the beginning of the decade, he made clear that he was working for a reconciliation between the military, the right-wing and those whom they persecuted. He also left Pinochet's fate totally in the hands of the Chilean courts.

Sections of the ruling class in Chile have sought to close the entire historical chapter. At every turn, the pro-business orientation of the Socialist Party has dictated policy. It fears opening up divisions at home that might also damage Chile's interests abroad. Thus, in 2000, Interior Minister and Socialist Party leader Jose Miguel Insulza could say: "I believe that national and foreign economic agents are sensitive to the stability and calmness of our country. In [Pinochet's prosecution], what investors will look at is whether we are capable of confronting this with calm."

Yet the issue has erupted again and again as was seen during the Pinochet's detention in Britain and over the subsequent decade. There remains a deep determination among the masses to obtain justice.