

Obama in Chile: No apology for 1973 coup

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During his visit to Chile, President Barack Obama rejected a direct appeal for an apology for Washington's role in fomenting a fascist-military coup that plunged the country into 17 years of dictatorship and entailed the murder, torture, imprisonment and exile of hundreds of thousands.

Obama appeared Monday at a joint press conference with Chilean President Sebastian Pinera held in Santiago's La Moneda Palace. The palace was the site of then-President Salvador Allende's death on September 11, 1973, as Chilean combat planes bombarded the building in a military overthrow that had been orchestrated together with the CIA and the Pentagon.

The first question came from a Chilean reporter who asked the American president to speak to the "open wounds of the dictatorship of General [Augusto] Pinochet," noting that "many of these wounds have to do with the United States."

He asked first whether Washington would collaborate with the ongoing Chilean investigations into the deaths of Allende and Eduardo Frei Montalva, a Christian Democrat who was elected president in 1964 with CIA backing, but then fell afoul of the US-backed dictatorship over his belated opposition to Pinochet. Investigators have concluded that his 1982 death was a medical murder.

The reporter then appealed directly to Obama, asking whether "the United States is willing to ask for forgiveness for what it did in those very difficult years in the '70s in Chile?"

To the first question, Obama stated that "any requests that are made to obtain more information about the past is something that we will certainly consider."

Cables recently released by WikiLeaks, however, indicate that Washington has already received such requests from the Chilean authorities investigating Frei's mysterious death and has systematically stonewalled them. The cables, however, reveal that Washington is well informed about what happened to the ex-president.

One of the cables, written in December 2009, includes the following macabre details:

"Less than one hour after his death, doctors from the Catholic University Pathological Anatomy Department came to Clinica Santa Maria and performed an autopsy of Frei without the family's consent. The highly unusual autopsy was allegedly performed in the hospital room where Frei died, using a ladder to hang the body upside down in order to drain bodily fluids into the bathtub. Some organs, and in particular those whose chemical compositions might indicate poisoning, were removed and destroyed, and the body was embalmed."

The cable, classified as "confidential," also noted that Chilean investigators had sought information from the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) about possible shipments of biological warfare materials to the Chilean dictatorship in 1981 or 1982. On instructions from Washington, the CDC refused to provide any information on the grounds that the investigators had failed to "follow proper protocols."

The cable concludes with the enigmatic assertion that "Chile's tragic recent history continues to divide its people, and the death of this emblematic president seems destined to be yet one more area in which the full truth may never be known."

As to the second part of the reporter's question, Obama made it clear that no such apology would be forthcoming. He said that the US and Chile could not be "trapped by our history" and insisted that he could not "speak to all of the policies of the past," but only "to the policies of the present and the future."

It was the great American novelist William Faulkner who said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Nowhere is this statement more applicable than to the bloody record of the US role in Chile.

The facts of the 1973 coup are well known. The latest official report in Chile put its death toll at 3,200, though most credible estimates have concluded that the killed and "disappeared" amount to three to ten times that number. Tens of thousands more were subjected to arbitrary arrest and torture.

The administration of Richard Nixon had established a

policy of overthrowing the elected government of Salvador Allende from the time of its election in 1970. As his national security adviser Henry Kissinger put it, “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.”

The CIA funneled millions of dollars into Chile to finance fascist organizations and aid in the organization of employers’ strikes aimed at crippling the country’s economy.

Classified documents released under the Clinton administration—although heavily expurgated—provided official confirmation that the US government was intimately involved in the coup and fully supported the killing spree that it unleashed, defending the regime against its international critics.

Moreover, the CIA maintained close ties with Chile’s DINA secret police, which became the lynchpin of a continental alliance of state terror and assassination known as Operation Condor, used to hunt down and murder opponents of Latin America’s dictatorships throughout the region.

And, while Obama on Monday praised Chile’s “robust open markets” as some kind of indication that Chile had overcome the legacy of dictatorship, in reality, the present economic setup is very much a product of the murderous repression unleashed against the working class under Pinochet. Chile today ranks among the most unequal countries in the world. The years of armed repression saw a vast transfer of wealth from working people to a wealthy elite dominated by Pinochet and his cronies. Millions were relegated to poverty and unemployment, while a layer that included the Pinera family became billionaires through the looting of state-owned enterprises.

The Chilean dictatorship of General Pinochet lasted for 17 years (1973-1990). Not only do its wounds remain open; the reality is that there has been no settling of accounts for the political repression unleashed against Chilean workers, students and all those suspected of socialist sympathies during that period.

Pinochet himself died in 2006, having never received any punishment for his crimes, while only a small fraction of those who carried out the atrocities committed under his dictatorship have been prosecuted. The majority of the military and police assassins and torturers enjoy impunity, as do those within the US government who collaborated with and supported their heinous actions.

Among them is Kissinger, who deserves to stand trial as a war criminal for his role in the Chilean events, yet

remains a dean of US foreign policy and periodic adviser to the Obama administration itself.

Then there is the case of Jeffrey Davidow, head of the corporate-funded Institute of the Americas, who was tapped by Obama to serve as his adviser to the 2009 Summit of the Americas. Listed as a “political officer”—a common cover for covert CIA personnel—at the US embassy in Santiago from 1970 to 1974, he was directly involved in the preparation of the US-backed coup.

A memo to the military regime drafted by Davidow in the coup’s aftermath warned of a “conspiracy on the part of the enemies of Chile to paint the junta in the worst possible terms.” Shortly afterwards, a series of assassinations of such “enemies” began, with the 1974 car bomb assassination of the dissident general Carlos Prats in Argentina, the attempted assassination of ex-vice president Bernardo Leighton in Italy in 1975 and the car bomb assassination of former Allende minister Orlando Letelier and his American secretary Ronni Moffitt in the streets of Washington in 1976.

In a toast delivered Monday night at a state dinner in La Moneda, Obama used the phrase: “Tell me who is by your side and I’ll tell you who you are.” Indeed.

It is not just a matter of protecting highly placed individuals who are directly implicated in the crimes against the Chilean people. The reality is that the entire US military-intelligence apparatus that engineered the coup in Chile remains firmly in place in Washington. It enjoys even greater impunity than the criminal officials of the Pinochet dictatorship, with not one person held accountable for the killings, torture, abductions and unlawful detentions carried out in the so-called “war on terror.”

Obama could not apologize for the Chilean coup without incurring the wrath of the CIA, something he has made clear from the outset of his administration he will not do.

And, as the coup in Honduras in June of 2009 established, Washington and the present administration are prepared to employ the same bloody methods today as in September 1973.



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