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Pinochet's Death Spares Bush Family

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Gen. Augusto Pinochet's death on Dec. 10 means the Bush Family can breathe a little bit easier, knowing that criminal proceedings against Chile's notorious dictator can no longer implicate his longtime friend and protector, former President George H.W. Bush.

Although Chilean investigations against other defendants may continue, the cases against Pinochet end with his death of a heart attack at the age of 91. Pinochet's death from natural causes also marks a victory for world leaders, including George H.W. and George W. Bush, who shielded Pinochet from justice over the past three decades.

The Bush Family's role in the Pinochet cover-up began in 1976 when then-CIA Director George H.W. Bush diverted investigators away from Pinochet's guilt in a car bombing in Washington that killed political rival Orlando Letelier and an American, Ronni Moffitt.

The cover-up stretched into the presidency of George W. Bush when he sidetracked an FBI recommendation to indict Pinochet in the Letelier-Moffitt murders.

Over those intervening 30 years, Pinochet allegedly engaged in a variety of illicit operations, including terrorism, torture, murder, drug trafficking, money-laundering and illicit arms shipments – sometimes with the official collusion of the U.S. government.

In the 1980s, when George H.W. Bush was Vice President, Pinochet's regime helped funnel weapons to the Nicaraguan contra rebels and to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, an operation that also implicated then-CIA official Robert M. Gates, who will be the next U.S. Secretary of Defense.

When Pinochet faced perhaps his greatest risk of prosecution – in 1998 when he was detained in London pending extradition to Spain on charges of murdering Spanish citizens – former President George H.W. Bush protested Pinochet's arrest, calling it "a travesty of justice" and joining in a successful appeal to the British courts to let Pinochet go home to Chile.

Once Pinochet was returned to Chile, the wily ex-dictator employed a legal strategy of political obstruction and assertions of ill health to avert prosecution. Until his death, he retained influential friends in the Chilean power structure and in key foreign capitals, especially Washington.

Pinochet's History

Pinochet's years in the service of U.S. foreign policy date back to the early 1970s when Richard Nixon's administration wanted to destroy Chile's democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende.

The CIA launched a covert operation to "destabilize" Allende's government, with the CIA-sponsored chaos ending in a bloody coup on Sept. 11, 1973. Gen. Pinochet seized power and Allende was shot to death when Pinochet's forces stormed the Presidential Palace.

Thousands of political dissidents – including Americans and other foreigners – were rounded up and executed. Many also were tortured.

With Pinochet in control, the CIA turned its attention to helping him overcome the negative publicity that his violent coup had engendered around the world. One "secret" CIA memo, written in early 1974, described the success of "the Santiago Station's propaganda project." The memo said:

"Prior to the coup the project's media outlets maintained a steady barrage of anti-government criticism, exploiting every possible point of friction between the government and the democratic opposition, and emphasizing the problems and conflicts that were developing between the government and the armed forces. Since the coup, these media outlets have supported the new military government. They have tried to present the Junta in the most positive light." [See Peter Kornbluh's *The Pinochet File*]

Despite the CIA's P.R. blitz, however, Pinochet and his military subordinates insisted on dressing up and acting like a casting agent's idea of Fascist bullies. The dour Pinochet was known for his fondness for wearing a military cloak that made him resemble a well-dressed Nazi SS officer.

Pinochet and the other right-wing military dictators who dominated South America in the mid-1970s also had their own priorities, one of which was the elimination of political opponents who were living in exile in other countries.

Though many of these dissidents weren't associated with violent revolutionary movements, the anticommunist doctrine then in vogue among the region's right-wing military made few distinctions between armed militants and political activists.

By 1974, Chilean intelligence was collaborating with freelancing anti-Castro Cuban extremists and other South American security forces to eliminate any and all threats to right-wing military power.

The first prominent victim of these cross-border assassinations was former Chilean Gen. Carlos Prats, who was living in Argentina and was viewed as a potential rival to Pinochet because Prats had opposed Pinochet's coup that shattered Chile's long history as a constitutional democracy.

Learning that Prats was writing his memoirs, Pinochet's secret police chief Manuel Contreras dispatched Michael Townley, an assassin trained in explosives, to Argentina. Townley planted a bomb under Prats's car, detonating it on Sept. 30, killing Prats at the door and incinerating Prats's wife who was trapped inside the car.

On Oct. 6, 1975, a gunman approached Chilean Christian Democratic leader Bernardo Leighton who was walking with his wife on a street in Rome. The gunman shot both Leighton and his wife, severely wounding both of them.

Operation Condor

In November 1975, the loose-knit collaboration among the Southern Cone dictatorships took on a more formal structure during a covert intelligence meeting in Santiago. Delegates from the security forces of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia committed themselves to a regional strategy against "subversives."

In recognition of Chile's leadership, the conference named the project after Chile's national bird, the giant vulture that traverses the Andes Mountains. The project was called "Operation Condor."

The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency confidentially informed Washington that the operation had three phases and that the "third and reportedly very secret phase of 'Operation Condor' involves the formation of special teams from member countries who are to carry out operations to include assassinations."

The Condor accord formally took effect on Jan. 30, 1976, the same day George H.W. Bush was sworn in as CIA director.

In Bush's first few months, right-wing violence across the Southern Cone of South America surged. On March 24, 1976, the Argentine military staged a coup, ousting the ineffectual President Isabel Peron and escalating a brutal internal security campaign against both violent and non-violent opponents on the Left.

The Argentine security forces became especially well-known for grisly methods of torture and the practice of "disappearing" political dissidents who would be snatched from the streets or from their homes, undergo torture and never be seen again.

Like Pinochet, the new Argentine dictators saw themselves on a mission to save Western Civilization from the clutches of leftist thought.

They took pride in the "scientific" nature of their repression. They were clinical practitioners of anticommunism – refining torture techniques, erasing the sanctuary of international borders and collaborating with right-wing terrorists and organized-crime elements to destroy leftist movements.

Later Argentine government investigations discovered that its military intelligence officers advanced Nazi-like methods of torture by testing the limits of how much pain a human being could endure before dying. Torture methods included experiments with electric shocks, drowning, asphyxiation and sexual perversions, such as forcing mice into a woman's vagina.

The totalitarian nature of the anticommunism gripping much of South America revealed itself in one particularly bizarre Argentine practice, which was used when pregnant women were captured as suspected subversives.

The women were kept alive long enough to bring the babies to full term. The women then were subjected to forced labor or Caesarian section. The newborns were given to military families to be raised in the ideology of anticommunism while the new mothers were executed.

Many were taken to an airport near Buenos Aires, stripped naked, shackled to other prisoners and put on a plane. As the plane flew over the Rio Plata or out over the Atlantic Ocean, the prisoners were shoved through a cargo door, sausage-like, into the water to drown. All told, the Argentine war against subversion would claim an estimated 30,000 lives.

The 1976 Argentine *coup d'etat* allowed the pace of cross-border executions under Operation Condor to quicken.

On May 21, gunmen killed two Uruguayan congressmen on a street in Buenos Aires. On June 4, former Bolivian President Juan Jose Torres was slain also in Buenos Aires. On June 11, armed men kidnapped and tortured 23 Chilean refugees and one Uruguayan who were under United Nations protection.

A Grudge

Despite protests from human rights groups, Pinochet and his fellow dictators felt immune from pressure because of their powerful friends in Washington. Pinochet's sense of impunity led him to contemplate silencing one of his most eloquent critics, Chile's former Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier, who lived in the U.S. capital.

Earlier in their government careers, when Letelier was briefly defense minister in Allende's government, Pinochet had been his subordinate. After the coup, Pinochet imprisoned Letelier at a desolate concentration camp on Dawson Island, but international pressure won Letelier release a year later.

Now, Pinochet was chafing under Letelier's rough criticism of the regime's human rights record. Letelier was doubly infuriating to Pinochet because Letelier was regarded as a man of intellect and charm, even impressing CIA officers who observed him as "a personable, socially pleasant man" and "a reasonable, mature democrat," according to biographical sketches.

By summer 1976, George H.W. Bush's CIA was hearing a lot about Operation Condor from South American sources who had attended a second organizational conference of Southern Cone intelligence services.

These CIA sources reported that the military regimes were preparing "to engage in 'executive action' outside the territory of member countries." In intelligence circles, "executive action" is a euphemism for assassination.

Meanwhile, Pinochet and intelligence chief Manuel Contreras were putting in motion their most audacious assassination plan yet: to eliminate Orlando Letelier in his safe haven in Washington, D.C.

In July 1976, two operatives from Chile's intelligence service DINA – Michael Townley and Armando Fernandez Larios – went to Paraguay where DINA had arranged for them to get false passports and visas for a trip to the United States.

Townley and Larios were using the false names Juan Williams and Alejandro Romeral and a cover story claiming they were investigating suspected leftists working for Chile's state copper company in New York. Townley and Larios said their project had been cleared with the CIA's Station Chief in Santiago.

A senior Paraguayan official, Conrado Pappalardo, urged U.S. Ambassador George Landau to cooperate, citing a direct appeal from Pinochet in support of the mission. Supposedly, the Paraguayan government claimed, the two Chileans were to meet with CIA Deputy Director Vernon Walters.

An alarmed Landau recognized that the visa request was highly unusual, since such operations are normally coordinated with the CIA station in the host country and are cleared with CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Though granting the visas, Landau took the precaution of sending an urgent cable to Walters and photostatic copies of the fake passports to the CIA. Landau said he received an urgent cable back signed by CIA Director Bush, reporting that Walters, who was in the process of retiring, was out of town.

When Walters returned a few days later, he cabled Landau that he had "nothing to do with this" mission. Landau immediately canceled the visas.

The Assassination

It remains unclear what – if anything – Bush's CIA did after learning about the "Paraguayan caper." Normal protocol would have required senior CIA officials to ask their Chilean counterparts about the supposed trip to Langley.

However, even with the declassification of more records in recent years, that question has never been fully answered.

The CIA also demonstrated little curiosity over the Aug. 22, 1976, arrival of two other Chilean operatives using the names, Juan Williams and Alejandro Romeral, the phony names that were intended to hide the identity of the two operatives in the aborted assassination plot.

When these two different operatives arrived in Washington, they made a point of having the Chilean Embassy notify Walters's office at CIA.

"It is quite beyond belief that the CIA is so lax in its counterespionage functions that it would simply have ignored a clandestine operation by a foreign intelligence service in Washington, D.C., or elsewhere in the United States," wrote John Dinges and Saul Landau in their 1980 book, *Assassination on Embassy Row*. "It is equally implausible that Bush, Walters, Landau and other officials were unaware of the chain of international assassinations that had been attributed to DINA."

Apparently, DINA had dispatched the second pair of operatives, using the phony names, to show that the initial contacts for visas in Paraguay were not threatening. In other words, the Chilean government had the replacement team of Williams and Romeral go through the motions of a trip to Washington with the intent to visit Walters to dispel any American suspicions or to spread confusion among suspicious U.S. officials.

But it's still unclear whether Bush's CIA contacted Pinochet's government about its mysterious behavior and, if not, why not.

As for the Letelier plot, DINA was soon plotting another way to carry out the killing. In late August, DINA dispatched a preliminary team of one man and one woman to do surveillance on Letelier as he moved around Washington.

Then, Townley was sent under a different alias to carry out the murder. After arriving in New York on Sept. 9, 1976, Townley connected with Cuban National Movement leader Guillermo Novo in Union City, New Jersey, and then headed to Washington. Townley assembled a

remote-controlled bomb that used pieces bought at Radio Shack and Sears.

On Sept. 18, joined by Cuban extremists Virgilio Paz and Dionisio Suarez, Townley went to Letelier home in Bethesda, Maryland, outside Washington. The assassination team attached the bomb underneath Letelier's Chevrolet Chevelle.

Three days later, on the morning of Sept. 21, Paz and Suarez followed Letelier as he drove to work with two associates, Ronni Moffitt and her husband Michael. As the Chevelle proceeded down Massachusetts Avenue, through an area known as Embassy Row, the assassins detonated the bomb.

The blast ripped off Letelier's legs and punctured a hole in Ronni Moffitt's jugular vein. She drowned in her own blood at the scene; Letelier died after being taken to George Washington University Hospital. Michael Moffitt survived.

At the time, the attack represented the worst act of international terrorism on U.S. soil. Adding to the potential for scandal, the terrorism had been carried out by a regime that was an ostensible ally of the United States, one that had gained power with the help of the Nixon administration and the CIA.

Threat to Bush

Bush's reputation was also at risk. As authors Dinges and Landau noted in *Assassination on Embassy Row,* "the CIA reaction was peculiar" after the cable from Ambassador Landau arrived disclosing a covert Chilean intelligence operation and asking Deputy Director Walters if he had a meeting scheduled with the DINA agents.

"Landau expected Walters to take quick action in the event that the Chilean mission did not have CIA clearance. Yet a week passed during which the assassination team could well have had time to carry out their original plan to go directly from Paraguay to Washington to kill Letelier. Walters and Bush conferred during that week about the matter."

"One thing is clear," Dinges and Landau wrote, "DINA chief Manuel Contreras would have called off the assassination mission if the CIA or State Department had expressed their displeasure to the Chilean government. An intelligence officer familiar with the case said that any warning would have been sufficient to cause the assassination to be scuttled. Whatever Walters and Bush did – if anything – the DINA mission proceeded."

Within hours of the bombing, Letelier's associates accused the Pinochet regime, citing its hatred of Letelier and its record for brutality. The Chilean government, however, heatedly denied any responsibility.

That night, at a dinner at the Jordanian Embassy, Senator James Abourezk, a South Dakota Democrat, spotted Bush and approached the CIA director. Abourezk said he was a friend of Letelier's and beseeched Bush to get the CIA "to find the bastards who killed him." Abourezk said Bush responded: "I'll see what I can do. We are not without assets in Chile."

A problem, however, was that one of the CIA's best-placed assets – DINA chief Contreras – was part of the assassination. Wiley Gilstrap, the CIA's Santiago Station Chief, did approach Contreras with questions about the Letelier bombing and wired back to Langley Contreras's assurance that the Chilean government wasn't involved.

Following the strategy of public misdirection already used in hundreds of "disappearances," Contreras pointed the finger at the Chilean Left. Contreras suggested that leftists had killed Letelier to turn him into a martyr.

CIA headquarters, of course, had plenty of evidence that Contreras was lying. The Pinochet government had flashed its intention to mount a suspicious operation inside the United States by involving the U.S. Embassy in Paraguay and the deputy director of the CIA. Bush's CIA even had in its files a photograph of the leader of the terrorist squad, Michael Townley.

Yet, rather than fulfilling his promise to Abourezk to "see what I can do," Bush ignored leads that would have taken him into a confrontation with Pinochet. The CIA either didn't put the pieces together or avoided the obvious conclusions the evidence presented.

The Cover-up

Indeed, the CIA didn't seem to want any information that might implicate the Pinochet regime. On Oct. 6, a CIA informant in Chile went to the CIA Station in Santiago and relayed an account of Pinochet denouncing Letelier.

The informant said the dictator had called Letelier's criticism of the government "unacceptable." The source "believes that the Chilean Government is directly involved in Letelier's death and feels that investigation into the incident will so indicate," the CIA field report said. [See Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*.]

But Bush's CIA chose to accept Contreras's denials and even began leaking information that pointed away from the real killers.

Newsweek's Periscope reported in the magazine's Oct. 11, 1976, issue that "the Chilean secret police were not involved. …. The [Central Intelligence] agency reached its decision because the bomb was too crude to be the work of experts and because the murder, coming while Chile's rulers were wooing U.S. support, could only damage the Santiago regime."

Similar stories ran in other newspapers, including the New York Times.

Despite the lack of help from Washington, the FBI's legal attaché in Buenos Aires, Robert Scherrer, began putting the puzzle together only a week after the Letelier bombing.

Relying on a source in the Argentine military, Scherrer reported to his superiors that the assassination was likely the work of Operation Condor, the assassination project organized by the Chilean government.

Another break in the case came two weeks after the Letelier assassination on Oct. 6, 1976, when anti-Castro terrorists planted a bomb on a Cubana Airlines DC-8 before it took off from Barbados. Nine minutes after takeoff, the bomb exploded, plunging the plane into the Caribbean and killing all 73 people on board including the Cuban national fencing team.

Two Cuban exiles, Hernan Ricardo and Freddy Lugo, who had left the plane in Barbados, confessed that they had planted the bomb. They named two prominent anti-Castro extremists, Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada, as the architects of the attack.

A search of Posada's apartment in Venezuela turned up Cubana Airlines timetables and other incriminating documents. Although Posada was a CIA-trained Bay of Pigs veteran and

stayed in close touch with some former CIA colleagues, senior CIA officials again pleaded ignorance.

For the second time in barely two weeks, Bush's CIA had done nothing to interfere with terrorist attacks involving anticommunist operatives with close ties to the CIA. [For more on Posada, see Consortiumnews.com's "Bush's Hypocrisy: Cuban Terrorists."]

But the Cubana Airlines bombing put federal investigators on the right track toward solving the Letelier assassination. They began to learn more about the network of right-wing terrorists associated with Operation Condor and its international Murder Inc. However, CIA Director Bush continued to assert the innocence of Pinochet's regime.

On Nov. 1, 1976, the Washington Post cited CIA officials in reporting that "operatives of the present Chilean military Junta did not take part in Letelier's killing." The Post added that "CIA Director Bush expressed this view in a conversation late last week with Secretary of State Kissinger."

Regarding the Letelier murder, George H.W. Bush was never pressed to provide a full explanation of his actions.

When I submitted questions to Bush in 1988 – while he was Vice President and I was a Newsweek correspondent preparing a story on his year as CIA director – Bush's chief of staff Craig Fuller responded, saying "the Vice President generally does not comment on issues related to the time he was at the Central Intelligence Agency and he will have no comment on the specific issues raised in your letter."

My editors at Newsweek subsequently decided not to publish any story about Bush's year at the CIA though he was then running for President and citing his CIA experience as an important element of his resumé.

The Carter Interregnum

After Jimmy Carter became President in 1977, federal investigators cracked the Letelier case, successfully bringing charges against Townley and several other conspirators.

Prosecutor Eugene Propper told me that Bush's CIA did provide some information about the background of suspects, but didn't volunteer the crucial information about the Paraguayan gambit or supply the photo of the chief assassin, Townley. "Nothing the agency gave us helped us break this case," Propper said.

Though U.S. prosecutors grasped the criminal nature of the Pinochet government, the wheels of justice turned slowly. Before the prosecutors could climb the chain of command in Chile, the Republicans had returned to power in 1981, with George H.W. Bush serving as Vice President and acting as a top foreign policy adviser to President Ronald Reagan.

Despite the mounting evidence of Pinochet's guilt in a terrorist act on U.S. soil, the dictator emerged from his pariah status of the Carter years to regain his position as a favored ally under Bush and Reagan.

When help was needed on sensitive projects, the Reagan administration often turned to Pinochet. For instance, in 1982, after Reagan decided to tilt Iraq's way during the Iran-Iraq War, one of Pinochet's favored arms dealers, Carlos Cardoen, manufactured and shipped

controversial weapons to Saddam Hussein's army.

Regarding these Iraqi arms shipments, former National Security Council aide Howard Teicher swore out an affidavit in 1995 detailing Reagan's decision and describing the secret roles of CIA Director William Casey and his deputy, Robert Gates, in shepherding the military equipment to Iraq.

Teicher said the secret arming of Iraq was approved by Reagan in June 1982 as part of a National Security Decision Directive. Under it, Casey and Gates "authorized, approved and assisted" delivery of cluster bombs and other materiel to Iraq, Teicher said.

Teicher's affidavit corroborated earlier public statements by former Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe and Iranian-born businessman Richard Babayan, who claimed first-hand knowledge of Gates's central role in the secret Iraq operations.

In his 1992 book *Profits of War,* Ben-Menashe wrote that Israeli Mossad director Nachum Admoni approached Gates in 1985 seeking help in shutting down unconventional weapons, especially chemicals, moving through the Chilean arms pipeline to Iraq.

Ben-Menashe wrote that Gates attended a meeting in Chile in 1986 with Cardoen present at which Gates tried to calm down the Israelis by assuring them that U.S. policy was simply to ensure a channel of conventional weapons for Iraq.

Though Gates denied Ben-Menashe's and Babayan's allegations in 1991 – when Gates underwent confirmation hearings to be CIA director – he has never been asked to publicly respond to Teicher's affidavit which was filed in a Miami court case in 1995.

Members of the Senate Armed Services Committee were aware of the discrepancies between the Teicher and Gates accounts when Gates appeared at a Dec. 5, 2006, confirmation hearing to be Secretary of Defense, but no one asked Gates to respond to Teicher's sworn statement.

A source at the United Nations also has told me that some of the documents captured in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 shed light on the Cardoen arms pipeline, but those records have never been made public.

Key Leads

Other potential avenues for understanding Pinochet's covert role in supporting anticommunist strategies in the Reagan-Bush era opened recently, as former DINA chief Contreras turned on his old boss.

In a court document filed in early July 2006, Contreras implicated Pinochet and one of his sons in a scheme to manufacture and smuggle cocaine to Europe and the United States, explaining one source of Pinochet's $28 million fortune.

Contreras alleged that the cocaine was processed with Pinochet's approval at an Army chemical plant south of Santiago during the 1980s and that Pinochet's son Marco Antonio arranged the shipments of the processed cocaine. [NYT, July 11, 2006]

At the time of this alleged cocaine smuggling, Pinochet was a close ally of the Reagan administration, providing help on a variety of sensitive intelligence projects, including

shipping military equipment to Nicaraguan contra rebels who also were implicated in the exploding cocaine trade to the United States. [For details on the contra-cocaine scandal, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

Contreras said Eugenio Berrios, a chemist for Chile's secret police, oversaw the drug manufacturing. Berrios also was accused of producing poisons for Pinochet to use in murdering political enemies. Berrios disappeared in 1992. [For details on the Berrios mystery, see Consortiumnews.com's "Pinochet's Mad Scientist."]

As this drip-drip-drip of evidence accumulated implicating Pinochet and his American allies in serious crimes and international intrigue, it fell to the second generation of George Bush presidents to put a finger in the dike.

Near the end of the Clinton presidency in 2000, an FBI team reviewed new evidence that had become available in the Letelier case and recommended the indictment of Pinochet.

But the final decision was left to the incoming Bush administration – and George W. Bush, like his father, chose to protect Pinochet. In doing so, the younger George Bush also protected his father's reputation and the legacy of the Bush Family.

Freed from Washington's legal pressure, Pinochet was able to fend off intermittent attempts in Chile to bring him to justice during the last half dozen years of his life.

"Every day it is clearer that Pinochet ordered my brother's death," human rights lawyer Fabiola Letelier told the New York Times on the 30th anniversary of the Letelier-Moffitt assassinations. "But for a proper and complete investigation to take place we need access to the appropriate records and evidence." [NYT, Sept. 21, 2006]

Ultimately, Pinochet escaped a formal judgment of guilt for his many crimes, dying on the afternoon of Dec. 10, 2006, at the Military Hospital of Santiago from complications resulting from a heart attack.

As Pinochet took his last breath, the Bush Family, too, had reason for a sigh of relief.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek.

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