



Persistent Persecution of Pinochet

In the ripeness of his years, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “The man who never looked into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to the truth than he whose mind is filled with half-truths and errors.” The current case of *The Press v. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte* is proof enough that Jefferson’s caustic observation remains true to this day.

There has never been a time when Pinochet, the former president of Chile, was handled fairly by the mainstream press. The *Washington Post*, for instance, referred to Pinochet on December 8, 1997 as “the aging ex-dictator” and as “Chile’s former iron-fisted ruler.” But then Pinochet was detained in England, on October 16, 1998, by an extradition attempt instigated by radical Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon. As a result, bringing Pinochet to “justice” for his alleged “crimes” became an international cause célèbre, and the media dutifully played its part in portraying the man as an arch-fiend. Nowhere, it seemed, could references to Pinochet be found that didn’t include the unflattering description “ex-dictator.” Taking such defamation to the extreme, the *New York Times Magazine* made the bold accusation in its December 1999 issue that “Not Attila nor Nero nor Torquemada were less cruel than Himmler, Beria, or Pinochet.”

Yet, it was under Pinochet’s leadership that an incipient Communist dictatorship in Chile was stopped cold, preserving a balance of power in the Western Hemisphere favorable to the United States. At a minimum, he spared the United States the unpleasant experience of having to fight another Vietnam war. Rather than suffer exorciation at the hands of the media, this man should be honored as a hero. Indeed, upon his return to Chile following his March 2 release from captivity, throngs of supporters joyously greeted their former president; and the 84-year-old Pinochet, clearly invigorated by the reception, gamely and defiantly waved his cane in the air to the cheers of the onlookers. Upon his arrival at the Military Hospital, more than 8,000 supporters greeted him. Nevertheless, many fallacious statements about Pinochet and his years in power continue to emanate from his enemies on the Left, enemies who have never forgiven the man who foiled their statist plans. Here are facts to answer their fallacies.

Fallacy #1: Pinochet was a dictator.

The *Washington Post* notwithstanding, prior to his Gestapo-style, midnight arrest in a London hospital the night of October 16, 1998, the media ordinarily (and properly) referred to Pinochet as “former president” and, in worst cases, as “ex-strongman.”

Almost by magic — and in violation of usual journalistic practice — the term “ex-dictator” began to crop up in news stories. By the end of October, rare was the news report which did not identify him as “the former dictator,” usually with the modifier “brutal” before “dictator.”

It is a matter of no mean importance to repeatedly portray a government leader as a “dictator.” Eventually, the proposition is accepted without question. It is then only a question of which evil deeds he committed — after all, isn’t that what dictators do, commit evil deeds?

Was Pinochet, in fact, a “dictator?” Not if words have any meaning, he was not. According to the *Oxford Encyclopedia English Dictionary*, a dictator is “a ruler with (often usurped) unrestricted authority.” Pinochet never possessed “unrestricted authority.”

The government Pinochet headed was “authoritarian,” and, as Jeanne Kirkpatrick pointed out years ago, there is a very real and important difference between an authoritarian government and a



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dictatorship. In an authoritarian regime, most people are free to live their lives, unmolested by the government. In a dictatorship, there is no freedom. Pinochet himself once described himself as a “dictator” — but in the classic, Roman sense: A man who rescued a tottering country from collapse. That is precisely what Pinochet and his colleagues did in Chile, beginning in 1973.

Pinochet came to power at the head of a four-man military junta — composed of the commanders of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Carabineros (para-military national police force) — who, together, staged the Sept. 11, 1973 revolution. In 1980, Chileans voted in a plebiscite — by a two-to-one margin — to approve a new Constitution, and with it the continuance of military rule for eight more years, during a carefully phased transition back to democratic government. Pinochet then became a constitutional president, under the very same constitution which has remained in force ever since, including under two democratic governments. Jose Toribio Merino Castro, head of the Chilean Navy, led the newly created legislative branch. The third branch of government, the judiciary — though generally favorable to the aims of the Pinochet government — remained independent throughout military rule.

The “Pinochet Constitution” was the most carefully crafted in the country’s history. Many people, including two ex-presidents, helped draft it. Later, following his defeat in the 1988 plebiscite which the military government planned, organized, and staged exactly as it had said it would, Pinochet agreed to negotiations with the united, center-Left opposition, which led to 54 amendments to that Constitution. He did so even though the military were still very much in power. Eighty-five percent of the Chilean people voted in favor of those changes, further legitimatizing that Constitution.

Leftists like to make much of the pro-government slant of the courts. In that slant, the courts mirrored virtually the totality of the non-Marxist leadership of Chile. (It would bear noting, also, that no one describes the U.S. courts as anti-democratic, even though their rulings are often at odds with the values of an overwhelming majority of American citizens). The real beef of the Left is that they don’t like the way the courts ruled.

Fallacy #2: The Chilean military snuffed out democracy for the purpose of simply seizing power for themselves.

Salvador Allende Gossens, the world’s first freely elected Marxist-Leninist president, came to power in 1970 with only 36 percent of the vote, a mere 40,000 votes (of three million cast) ahead of the candidate of the Right. The Christian Democrats finished a poor third — but then threw their weight behind Allende in exchange for a worthless set of “guarantees” he signed.

By mid-1973, even the Christian Democrats could see that Allende was leading their country into a long night of totalitarian rule. Former Chilean President Eduardo Frei Montalva, once a supporter of Allende and a man who played a major role in Allende’s rise to power, admitted as much: “Chile is in the throes of an economic disaster ... a veritable catastrophe no one could foresee would happen so swiftly nor so totally.” It was, he said, “a carnival of madness.”

In a private meeting with a top business group, 60 days before the end of Allende’s rule, Frei said: “There is nothing I or the Congress or any civilian can now do. Unfortunately, the only way out of this problem is with rifles.... I advise you to take your concerns to the commanders-in-chief of the Armed Forces.”

By the time the end did come, the Supreme Court, the Solicitor General, and the Chamber of Deputies had all declared Allende outside the law. A million Chileans, one-third of the labor force, were on strike, demanding that Allende resign.



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It was only then that the military acted, responding not to an appetite for power, but to the clamor of their fellow citizens. Indeed, even the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation — which investigated human rights abuses with a decidedly anti-military bias — said in its report: “Until their decisive intervention in September of 1973 ... the Armed Forces stayed aloof from the crisis.” In the immediate aftermath of that “decisive intervention,” all three living ex-presidents of Chile said the military had saved the country.

The Christian Democrats published a statement, a few days after the coup, in which they said, “to tell the truth, we admit that what has happened was, mainly, the consequence of the economic disaster, the institutional chaos, the armed violence and profound moral crisis to which the deposed Government had brought the country.... The evidence demonstrates that the Government of Allende, moved above all by the zeal to conquer total power, by whatever means ... was preparing a terribly merciless and bloody auto-coup, for the purpose of plunging the country into a communist dictatorship.”

Fallacy #3: Pinochet led a “bloody coup.”

Actually, fighting during Pinochet’s intervention lasted only four hours — mainly because Allende’s huge para-military forces ran for cover, and because of the awesome precision of the Air Force attack on the presidential palace: All 19 rockets hit the target. Allende committed suicide with an AK-47 rifle given him by Fidel Castro. Not more than 300 or 400, including attackers, died in the fighting that day, from one end of Chile to other.

Yet, rare is the media report which does not refer ritualistically to the “bloody coup” which overthrew Chile’s “democratic government.” It was not bloody. And Allende’s government had long since ceased being “democratic” when it fell during Pinochet’s coup.

Fallacy #4: Hundreds of thousands of victims were arrested and tortured in the days after the September coup.

According to an ABC News “fact sheet” distributed on the World Wide Web and entitled “The Story Behind a Dictator,” Pinochet arrested and tortured “approximately 180,000 individuals from various Latin American countries during the first year of his dictatorship according to Amnesty International and other human rights commissions.” In truth, Pinochet moved to rid the country of armed terrorist organizations, including many trained by two dozen East German Stasi agents who arrived in Chile only two weeks after Allende took power and who were joined soon after by Soviet and Soviet-bloc experts in murder and mayhem. Pinochet moved to rid the country of a growing para-military force, including many trained by Cuban General Patricio de la Guardia Font, who bragged about his role in training Chilean para-military groups during his 1988 show trial in Havana. Pinochet also moved to rid the country of 15,000 men and women who were in Chile illegally, many of whom were detached from underground Communist organizations operating in other South American countries.

The groups removed by Pinochet were not lacking in firepower. Former president Eduardo Frei spoke after the coup of the discovery of “armament superior in number and quality to that of the Army, armament for 30,000 men.” Frei also noted the boast of a Communist Party leader: “The generals have found only a small part of the arms we had.”

In any case, the total rounded up by Pinochet was much lower than 180,000. In 1974, a self-styled “International Commission of Jurists,” which was sent by the World Council of Churches and was strongly biased against the Pinochet government, reported that only a third of the supposed 180,000 were actually arrested, mostly from the ranks of those described above. Of those arrested, most were



quickly released.

Fallacy #5: Pinochet was part of “Operation Condor.”

According to the same ABC News article quoted above in Fallacy #4, Pinochet is “accused of being part of an organized plan of repression called ‘Operation Condor,’ which was allegedly implemented by the military regimes of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay in the 1970’s and 1980’s.” The truth is, Operation Condor lived and died in the space of three years, all of them in the 1970’s. It was set up to combat the very real threat of coordinated Communist subversion and terrorism in the member countries. Some of the methods used were brutal — and therefore reprehensible — much like the tactics employed by the Communists it was directed against. As for Pinochet’s involvement, no evidence has ever been presented by anyone to show that he even knew about it, much less was party to it. Even the Argentine leftist who put Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon up to investigating “Condor” is on record as saying that Pinochet did not know anything about it.

Fallacy #6: The “dictatorial” Pinochet was “ousted” by free elections.

Pinochet was not “ousted” any more than any other candidate in free and open elections is “ousted.” Pinochet voluntarily relinquished power in 1990. The 1988 plebiscite ending military rule was an explicit part of the planned and systematic return to democratic government — a plan designed and executed by Pinochet’s military government.

Fallacy #7: Pinochet has life-long immunity from prosecution in Chile by virtue of his position as senator-for-life and is covered by an amnesty for crimes committed before 1978.

Senatorial immunity does not shield Pinochet from prosecution, and indeed, a move is already underway in Chilean courts to lift Pinochet’s immunity. Such a move would allow the ex-president to respond to the 61 (at last count) charges already filed against him. As for the famous amnesty, of the 2,053 persons pardoned under it, 1,475 were Leftist extremists while only 578 were military men.

Fallacy #8: Pinochet and the military epitomized evil.

From the very beginning, the mainstream media — echoing the chorus of vilification emanating from academics, churchmen, entertainers, and politicians around the world — divided those in the Chilean drama into those who walked in darkness and those who walked in light.

Those who walked in darkness were the military and anyone associated with them. The anointed were those who opposed Pinochet — no matter how much blood they might have on their own hands, no matter how much guilt they bore for the failed attempt to convert Chile into a second Cuba.

British writer Robert Moss, an expert on Chile (and author of one of the best books on the Allende years), put it this way: “It was boy scoutish of them, but the soldiers who overthrew Salvador Allende thought that they had earned the gratitude of the American people, and of the West in general. For one thing, they had prevented the transformation of Chile into a sort of Latin American Czechoslovakia, complete with Soviet bases.... Alas, how little these soldiers understood the mood of the times in Washington or London.”

Another British author, David Holden, wrote: “Salvador Allende died a lucky man. In life he was a failure. Both his policies and his country were shattered long before the end. But in death, he achieved success beyond his dreams. Instantly canonized as the Western world’s newest left-wing martyr, he became overnight the most potent cult figure since his old friend, Che Guevara.”

In the spirit of the times, a “distinguished” American professor predicted: “the Chilean military will haul



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the nation back to the Stone Age, where a primitive and simplistic warrior village will be bedded down for a long sleep, awaiting the fantasied attacks coming from every direction.” The attacks did come, but the military led their battered nation, not into a Stone Age, but into a Golden Age — a Golden Age never before witnessed in Chile, and perhaps not, either, in all of Latin America.

Nor did the attacks ever let up. Not even as Pinochet helped Chile create the most successful economy in Latin America while leading the country back to democratic rule.

Henry Kissinger, no “right-wing extremist,” observed nine years after the coup:

No radical revolution, no matter how bloody — one thinks of Cuba, Iraq, Algeria, many African states, Vietnam’s occupation of Indochina, Khomeini’s Iran — has confronted the worldwide press campaign and the global indignation evoked by the clumsy authoritarians of Santiago. Was its crime in its methods, or in its position on the political spectrum? Was its sin the lack of civil freedom, or the abandonment of the leftist embrace? Why is the argument so widespread that left-wing governments ... are supposed to be moderated by economic assistance while conservative governments like Chile’s must be reformed by ostracism? The Socialist government of Sweden cut off aid to Chile on September 13, within forty-eight hours of the coup, before its implications could possibly be known. Had it ever acted with such alacrity, or at all, against left-wing tyrants? Indeed, it had lavished aid on Hanoi through the Vietnam war and afterward.

The systematic demonization of Pinochet that began immediately following his removal of Allende in 1973 prepared the way for his midnight arrest in England a few decades later. By then, the world was willing to believe just about anything about this man. But, truth be told, Pinochet was no latter-day Lycurgus, transforming Chile — like that ancient Spartan lawgiver had done to his unfortunate city-state — into a socialistic nightmare. Instead, he was more like a composite of the Athenian sage Solon, whose laws, as Robert Welch said, “foreshadowed and prepared the way for all republics of later ages,” and the Athenian authoritarian Peisistratus, whose firm guidance prepared Athens for the rule of Solon’s laws rather than the rule of men. It is because of this that today the intellectual heirs of Lycurgus seek the destruction of Pinochet.

A longtime foreign correspondent in Latin America, James R. Whelan is the author of six published books, including a history of Chile acclaimed by the principal newspaper of that country as, “without question, the most complete history of our country published in this century,” with the exception of the country’s own two leading historians. The leading Chilean news magazine, a year ago, listed him “among foreign intellectuals who best know Chile.” Whelan was founding editor, publisher, and CEO of the Washington Times. Among academic posts, he holds a lifetime appointment as associate professor at a private university in Santiago, and served two years (1993-95) as visiting professor at the country’s leading university, the University of Chile, in its Institute of Political Science.



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