Controlling Chile: Examining the Pinochet Regime

Augusto Pinochet 1977

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Honors Thesis
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PASS WITH DISTINCTION
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A Nation Divided

For the United States, and much of the world, September 11th has come to represent a day of mourning for the thousands killed during the infamous world trade center attack of 2001. In the nation of Chile, however, the date has long marked a far different assault, one that forever changed the course of history for every citizen living within its borders. The morning of September 11, 1973 went down in history as the second time in Chile’s long history of democracy that a dictator was able to take power, as General Augusto Ugarte Pinochet replaced President Salvador Allende in a military coup. The first time a legitimate president was overthrown occurred in 1924, when General Carlos Ibar’iez used his military influence to demand the resignation of Arturo Alessandri and subsequently remained in power for seven years before being forced to resign in turn.¹ Both the acquisition, term, and relinquish of power, however, were essentially peaceful. On the other end of the spectrum was the coup d’état of Pinochet that began with the death of Allende and continued its bloodshed, persecution, and suppression for nearly two decades.

Immediately following the violent overthrow of Allende was a subsequent purge of all political and military dissidents. There then began an endless wave of repression, censorship, brutal torture, and murder of all those rumored of opposing the new regime. Despite the massive human rights violations incurred under his command, however, Pinochet enjoys the continued support of many, and did not receive indiscriminate condemnation at any point during or after his rule. Ironically, both the United States and Great Britain preferred his harsh dictatorship to the democratically elected Allende, whom they thought would lead to Chile’s fall to communism. Perhaps even more

surprising, however, is the reaction of the Chilean people to the mention of September 11th. Despite the great span of time that has passed since the event occurred, the date still serves to both move and divide the people. Half will swear that the day marked the liberation of the country from the chains of a failing government and saved them from a fate far worse than death – the fall to Marxist control. The remainder of the population, those who make up the political left, unswervingly pledge that Pinochet’s acquisition of power was indeed a coup and the gravest disaster to ever occur to the nation.

As this clearly demonstrates, the military regime had a profound impact on shaping the history of the South American country and even now, after Pinochet’s removal from the political scene, his influence continues to be felt. Yet the true question remains not how much of an impact his rule had, but rather how he was able to obtain power in a democratically run country, and why he was able to maintain power for so long. To answer this puzzle, this paper will examine the political and economic situation leading up to 1973, the actions of the Pinochet regime, and the eventual return to democracy after his removal from power. As will be demonstrated, it was actually a great number of political and social issues that enabled the dictatorship to take place and hold on for as long as it did.

As with many other dictatorships throughout history, the main factor that allowed for the regime’s continued rule was its ability to reduce the population to obedience through the use of widespread, governmentally implemented fear. As explained in Introduction to Political Psychology, when utilizing state terror, “The goal is to terrorize the population into political submission and obedience while opponents of the government are being violently oppressed or killed.” Under Pinochet, this was
accomplished quite effectively through swift and brutal assassinations, incarcerations, torture, and disappearances of thousands of political dissidents or those suspected of collaborating with them. Immediately following Allende’s overthrow, the majority of these victims were former politicians, student demonstrators, political activists, professors, and labor union members. For the first time in Chilean history, its citizens were being forced against their will to leave the country and their brothers and sisters vanished without a trace. The implementation of la Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia (DINA, the Directorate for National Intelligence), signified the establishment of an intricate system of secret police and torture centers to “handle” the opposition. Yet the violence was so unexpected that many turned themselves in to the authorities when their names were broadcast as those wanted for questioning, never imagining that they would meet their end at the hands of Chilean officials.

Even as the human rights violations continued, the people stayed quiet because a “culture of terror” had been established precisely as a result of such practices. When people are scared, it is far easier for them to hide away than to draw attention to themselves as targets. This alone, however, should not be enough to silence an entire population when such injustices are occurring. What fed the submission was the lack of certainty surrounding the crimes. The vast majority of reports, especially the tortures, were spread only through rumors to much of the population, rarely as actual fact. This was of course heightened by the media censorship imposed by the government, which prohibited the discussion of any such “potential” crimes. The people were thus left with two choices: either acknowledge that horrendous atrocities were being committed to their

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2-5 Cottam, Martha; Dietz Uhler, Beth; Mastors, Elena; and Preston, Thomas. *PolS 428 Reader: Introduction to Political Psychology*. Pullman: Students Book Corporation, 2003. (461-463)

3-4 Wright, Thomas and Oñate, Rody. *Flight from Chile: Voices from Exile*. Albuquerque: University of New
neighbors and friends and risk being the next victim by speaking out, or simply refuse to believe that the accounts were true and dutifully follow what the government said. For nearly 17 years, the vast majority of Chileans showed the regime's success in establishing a culture of fear by choosing the latter.

**Calm Before the Storm**

To fully comprehend the significance of the 1973 military overthrow, it is essential to first understand the nature of the nation-state in the years leading up to it. Chile, the second-oldest democracy in the hemisphere, had enjoyed an almost uninterrupted history of democratic rule while it watched its neighbors come under dictatorship throughout the years. Instilled in the people was a great sense of pride for this tradition and their European roots; they even considered themselves the "England of Latin America." Yet despite the presence of political competition and free elections, the wealthy elite of the right wing continued to win time and time again as the voice of the working class grew stronger. Then, in the 1970 election, the unthinkable happened – Salvador Allende, the candidate of *la Unidad Popular* (the Popular Unity party, or UP), obtained more votes than either of the other two candidates. A self-proclaimed Marxist, Allende ran on a platform of increased social equality. He pledged to move the country as quickly as possible toward social democracy, with extensive nationalizations, agrarian reforms, and a more equitable distribution of wealth. He stated that he wanted to be the first *compañero* president, that is, he wished to be considered a comrade, an equal, and a friend to the people. In the end, he achieved the most support of any candidate, though the race was still close. With 36.2 percent of the votes going to Allende, 34.9 percent to

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former president Jorge Alessandri, and 27.8 percent to the Christian Democrat candidate Radomiro Tomic, he had not received an absolute majority, leaving the final decision up to the government officials.⁹

Immediately after the results became known there was strong international support to prevent Allende’s accession to power. The strongest opposition abroad came from American soil, where President Richard Nixon called an emergency meeting with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Attorney General John Mitchell, and CIA Director Richard Helms to discuss the situation. Nixon, true to the Cold War mentality of the time, was adamant that Allende, whom had run on a socialist platform, should not be allowed to take office for fear that the U.S. S.R. would obtain another stronghold in South America. He demanded that his presidency be prevented, and authorized some $250,000 to be given to then-president Eduardo Frei to bribe the congressmen not to authenticate Allende’s victory. As a backup, Nixon favored a U.S.-supported military coup that was to be kept secret from the Department of State and the Department of Defense, both of which he felt were too unreliable.¹⁰

Though the thought of a U.S.-backed coup was very popular with many wealthy Chileans, a great obstacle lay in the way. General Renee Schneider, Commander in Chief of the army, stood firm to the belief that the military should support the elected candidate. In an attempt to instill fear in those who would support Allende and remove the challenge, Schneider was assassinated in a CIA backed operation. Due to his immense popularity, however, the opposite reaction was achieved, as people were outraged and revolted by such a move. The result was that the government officially announced Allende as the next president on October 24, 1970. Reactions were grim. Edward Korry,

the U.S. Ambassador to Santiago, stated in a report to Kissinger on September 20, “Once Allende comes to power we shall do all within our power to condemn Chile and the Chileans to utmost deprivation and poverty.”\textsuperscript{11} The CIA went on to spend eight million dollars throughout Allende’s term in an attempt to sabotage him.\textsuperscript{12}

Unfortunately for Allende, resistance was not only that from abroad. He was opposed from every angle within the country, including even members of the UP. Internal strife between the Communists and Socialists, the two dominant parties of the UP, continued to rise during Allende’s term in office, as opinions over the most effective means of actions clashed. The Communists called for more drastic measures, seeing the Socialists as authoritarian, ineffective, and too cautious. They were especially critical of Allende’s strict adherence to the Constitution, feeling that the efforts being taken were not enough to bring about real change. The Socialists, for their part, favored following legal guidelines to achieve their goals and perceived the Communists as impatient, irresponsible, and too extreme.

Chile had historically been run on a conservative tradition, and despite Allende’s victory, the Senate and House of Representatives were both dominated by the right, leaving the UP at a severe strategic disadvantage. As a result, the right used their congressional power to thwart Allende at every opportunity, effectively halting the formation of the social programs that he attempted to formulate.\textsuperscript{13} The elite of the country clearly distrusted him, filled with alarm at the prospect of redistributing wealth and lessening class distinctions as Allende proposed. They, along with foreign nations, felt that the socialist democracy he strove to create would ultimately lead to another

communist dictatorship, despite his promises to uphold the Constitution and desire to maintain democracy.\footnote{Chavkin, Samuel. \textit{Storm Over Chile: The Junta Under Siege}. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1989. (55-60)}

In reality, Allende had no intentions of leading Chile to an era of Communist control. Instead, he favored moving the country peacefully to a social democracy, in which the working class could live comfortably and there would be a much more equitable society. During his first message to Congress in May 1971, Allende reinforced this commitment to democracy. He stated, “We (the government) recognize the political freedom of the opposition and we will conduct all of our activities with the terms of the Constitution. Political freedom is the prized possession of the Chilean people.”\footnote{O'Shaughnessy, Hugh. \textit{Pinochet: The Politics of Torture}. New York: New York University Press, 2000. (38-39)} He was unaware of the fact that within a few short years, that freedom would be taken from the people along with his own life.

\section*{Braced for the Fall}

Despite the odds, Allende’s first year of power was marked by extreme success, though due to circumstances beyond his control it did not last. As change began to occur, a “feel-good factor” filled the nation as arts and culture flourished and schoolchildren all received a daily glass of milk to help keep them nourished. Economic growth rose by 8.1 percent in 1971 alone and another 1.6 percent in 1972, while the minimum industrial wage went up 66.7 percent. Additional special bonuses were also given to those with lower wages.\footnote{In 1971, Allende managed to nationalize copper, the country’s largest industry, a move long approved of by many sectors. Unfortunately, this essentially snatched the nation’s two main producers of copper out of the hands of the U.S. multinational corporations Anaconda and Kennecot, whom had long dominated the international market. Though promised compensation for this act, it was later determined}
that "excessive profits" made by the two companies over the previous 15 years exceeded their value, and therefore no money would be given.\textsuperscript{17} Unsurprisingly, this further angered an already-unhappy Nixon, raising U.S. contempt for the Chilean president. In retaliation for the nationalizations, Nixon stated that the U.S. would withhold all support for the consideration of loans to be given to the nation from multinational development banks. This effectively served to withhold much needed financial support that otherwise would have been granted.\textsuperscript{18} Despite this setback, however, the UP was successful in one of their main goals: namely, to shift the balance of wealth to workers and salaries from the elite living off of interest. This trend marked the first time in history that the wealthy were held accountable for taxes and expected to take them seriously.\textsuperscript{19}

Unfortunately for the government, international copper prices began to fall between 1970-1972, wreaking havoc upon the country. Although Chile had a stable democracy, it also possessed a long history of economic instability due largely in part to its dependency upon the export of raw goods for survival. As such, any fluctuation in the international market had potentially disastrous effects for the economy, as had been made apparent by the 88 percent drop in exports experienced by Chile after World War I, making it the nation with the highest economic decline in the world.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, though falling copper prices could not be attributed to mismanagement on the part of Allende, its effects were another excuse for his opponents to despise him. Inflation rates soared to 500 percent a year and lines became commonplace at stores whose shelves were more often empty than stocked. In short time, rations were implemented in an attempt to distribute goods fairly, and the black market took root to sell suddenly scarce items such

as chickens or to exchange money for more stable American dollars at exorbitant rates. Essentially, the economy was near collapse by mid-1973.\textsuperscript{21}

As the economic instability continued to rise, so too did the uncertainty of the political situation. Following the nationalization of industries such as the copper mines, the workers in the country began to rally together to expropriate haciendas (rural estates) without government approval. Workers in the industrial sectors did the same in the factories of their cities. In response, los dueños (the owners) of the estates and factories armed themselves and fought to maintain control over their property, effectively leading to increased violence in the streets and essential civil warfare in the countryside. This “hypermobilization” of industries left Allende torn as to his proper course of action. His nature and convictions led him to uphold the law and stop the expropriators, yet that would effectively mean striking down his own constituents, whom he was fighting so hard to liberate from the chains of poverty and exploitation.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, his failure to do anything concrete led to further chaos in the countryside and increasing alienation of the middle class.

Further turmoil arose when the trucking industry essentially shut down for four full weeks in October 1972 during a massive strike to protest plans to nationalize the industry. Business resumed to normal only after much negotiation and the installation of military personnel to the cabinet of the professional and economic associations (los gremios), marking the beginning of the political infiltration of the armed forces. A second, even more massive strike sponsored by the CIA was held in 1973, which, along with the news that the Navy had revolted in Valparaiso, sent Allende’s government into an effective panic.\textsuperscript{23} A failed military coup on June 29, 1973 thoroughly proved that the

\textsuperscript{21-23} Wright, Thomas and Oñate, Roxy. \textit{Flight from Chile: Voices from Exile}. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. (3-4)
country was in crisis. Knowing full well that the nation was falling apart, Allende planned to announce to the public on the afternoon of September 11 a plebiscite to determine whether or not he would complete his term in office for the remaining three years.²⁴ This last desperate attempt to maintain peace, however, was never heard, as the President’s voice was silenced before the afternoon was out.

**Traitors in the Midst**

Plans to stage a military coup had been underway since the moment it was announced that Allende had won the 1970 election, but the final plan did not begin to solidify until shortly before he was overthrown. Ironically, the man who was to take power was initially not a player in the scheme, being kept in the dark until mere days before it was put into action. The true organizers of the plot, chiefly General Sergio Arellano Stark, questioned Pinochet’s cooperation, as he was then considered the armed forces’ leading constitutionalist and possessed a flawless track record of unswerving loyalty to the president.²⁵ His knowledge of the coup was therefore considered an unnecessary liability until the final pieces of the puzzle were being put into place, and the involvement of the army commander-in-chief became crucial. Pinochet, as had been feared, did not immediately jump on board once informed. In fact, he wavered up until the last moment, unsure of whether his allegiance still lied with the elected president or with the attempt to keep the country from slipping further into instability and away from the threat of communist rule. During his daughter’s birthday party September 9, he settled on the latter, and it was then his turn to persuade others to get on board that were still on the fence. The next day he secured the final pledges to back the coup and the date was set for September 11, having been postponed from the original goal of August 28.²⁶

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With these agreements, all four branches of the military were committed, though the commander-in-chief of each branch wasn’t necessarily aware of the involvement.

This, in itself, marked the precarious position the plotters were placing themselves in. They did not enjoy the full support of each military wing, meaning that there were commanders that must be overthrown before the coup could truly even begin to establish coherency between the groups. This meant that the participants were not only running the high risk of treason charges if success eluded them, but insubordination as well. Yet despite the dangers, the plan was set and all parties dedicated.

“Poor Pinochet, he's been captured.” - Salvador Allende, 11 Sept. 1973

So it was that at 6:30 a.m. on September 11, Pinochet received a call at his home from an alarmed Allende, disturbed by “unusual troop movements” in the city. Pinochet, though awake for over an hour by that time, pretended to have just gotten up, and after giving the President an ambiguous answer, assured him that he would look into the matter and call back shortly. Allende waited for a call that never came. At 7:00 a.m., Pinochet received another call from Allende, informing him that the Navy had revolted in Valparaiso, putting Admiral Montero, the rightful commander-in-chief, under house arrest. He offered virtually no resistance, and Admirals Patricio Carvajal and José Toribio Merino Castro took command of the forces.\footnote{O'Shaughnessy, Hugh. Pinochet: The Politics of Torture. New York: New York University Press. 2000. (54)}

Allende immediately left for la Moneda, accompanied by General José María Sepúlveda, the Director General of the Carabineros (the police force), around 50 policemen, and a group of close friends that had served as Allende’s bodyguards since he took office. Upon arrival at the presidential palace, however, they were met by a group of soldiers guarding the building, making it difficult for them to enter. Only after they
had eventually made their way inside were they informed that the army had also revolted, and they were now surrounded. Upon hearing the news that General César Mendoza Durán had seized control of the carabineros, the majority abandoned their former commander along with President Allende before the fighting began.28

Pinochet, for his part, made his way to the Santiago military base Peñalolén, from which he coordinated the attack with Merino in Valparaíso, General Gustavo Leigh Guzmán at El Bosque air force base, and Carvajal at the Ministry of Defense. Shortly thereafter, Allende was delivered an ultimatum signed by Pinochet, Merino, Leigh, and Mendoza demanding his relinquishment of power to the armed forces. Allende’s initial response was shock, but more so at the signatures on the paper than their demand. Up until that very moment, Allende had put faith in Pinochet’s loyalty. His reaction, rather than anger, was “Poor Pinochet, he’s been captured.”29 After the ultimatum was read, many more of Allende’s police and bodyguards left in fear, leaving the president with only a small group of true supporters, including Sepúlveda, to face the coming siege.

From that point, matters progressed rapidly, beginning with the bombing of a pro-government radio transmitter at 8:45 a.m. By 9:30 a.m. all international telephone service had been disconnected, and the last commercial flight to enter or leave the country for over a week took off at roughly the same time. Though few could have realized it at the time, this isolation essentially sealed the doom of Pinochet’s opposition, making it virtually impossible for the persecuted to escape from a country surrounded almost entirely by snowy peaks and ocean. “Chile, in effect, became a huge concentration camp on September 11, 1973.”30

By midmorning, Allende received a call from Carvajal offering him a plane and safe passage for himself and his family into exile. An irate Allende harshly replied that, as the elected president of the people, he would never surrender. Former Senator Maria Elena Carrera stated that she repeatedly heard the president say he would never relinquish power under a coup, and that “they will have to take me out of here feet first.”\(^{31}\) Thus, he stuck to his convictions, even after allegedly receiving further phone calls from places such as the U.S. embassy urging him to take the offer and leave the country. Though he knew that the likeliness of leaving la Moneda alive without surrendering were very slim, Allende refused to willingly hand over the power to a military junta.

In his last radio address to the nation late that morning, he said, “This is certainly the last time I shall speak to you. The air force has bombed all our radio stations. My words flow more from disappointment than from bitterness – let them serve as a moral condemnation of those who betrayed their oath.”\(^{32}\) Shortly thereafter, Pinochet gave the order to bomb the presidential palace.

**“Attack the Moneda. Give it to them!” - Augusto Pinochet, 11 Sept. 1973**

By noon, British-manufactured warplanes were dropping their weapons on la Moneda and Allende was left alone with a few ministers and friends after requesting all civilians to leave. José Muñoz, then chief of the carabineros’ special presidential guard, stayed with the president until the dismissal was given and recalls the disbelief that filled those in the building that the situation occurring was actually taking place. “Even when the planes were flying overhead and the bullets hit the windowpanes and the noise of the tanks was deafening and all the rest, we did not think that there would be violence of such magnitude….We never thought that our colleagues would carry out such a terrifying and

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savage mission."33 Indeed, there were few in the country that could have envisioned the
extreme violence of the coup and the years following, and many argue to this day that the
accounts of brutality and torture were merely fabricated to tarnish Pinochet’s name and
turn support away from the regime. Yet there is no denying that the events surrounding
the eleventh of September did indeed occur, and with a force that hit the country both
unexpectedly and fiercely. Allende, whose body was found sometime between 2:00 and
2:30 p.m., was among the first of countless victims that fell to the force of the junta. The
official version of his death is that he took his own life as troops stormed the building,
though this story is doubted by many. In any event, he died during the siege and the
military took hold of the nation.

At 4:00 p.m., Pinochet, Mendoza, Leigh, and Merino officially declared
themselves in charge of the country as a military junta with unlimited powers.34
Congress was shut down and all political activity banned until further notice, a two-day
national curfew was set, and an endless campaign launched on Catholic University
television to rally the people behind the new regime. There was a ceaseless string of
advertisements and announcements stating that the coup had occurred to save the nation
from the destructive influence of the former Marxist president who had been leading
Chile to ruin. They did everything in their power to sully his name, circulating rumors
that he was frivolous, drank too much, and essentially immoral.

They also claimed that the machine guns heard every night and the seemingly
endless violence in the streets was all staged by a new wave of extremists that must be
eliminated to secure peace.35 The junta, therefore, was merely performing the heroic act
of purging the country from those who wished to see it destroyed. The people, for their

33 Wright, Thomas and Oñate, Rody. *Flight from Chile: Voices from Exile.* Albuquerque: University of New
Mexico Press, 1998. (38)
part, were surprised at the violence of the coup, but not at its occurrence. Most were
convinced that Pinochet would bring an end to the chaos of the previous Allende years
and that the suspension of the government would just be a temporary solution until things
were more organized again. Thus, despite national curfews and continued violence in the
street, citizens mostly accepted the situation and waited for the government to be returned
to the right wing.

The Purge

The removal of “extremists” was conducted both thoroughly and indiscriminately,
extending to political opponents and student protestors alike, along with anyone
suspected of having information about them. One of the first of such acts was the
elimination of political prisoners in the days immediately following the coup. Captain
Antonio Palomo (Pinochet’s personal pilot), was ordered to load up a helicopter with
these prisoners (along with some corpses) and dispose of them. Those designated to the
“Puerto Montt” category were thrown out over the Andes, while those in the “Moneda”
category were dumped in the ocean with weights tied around their necks.36 Also
occurring in these first few days was the mass murder of thousands of suspected Marxists
and revolutionaries, who were herded into soccer stadiums, symbols of national pride,
and summarily executed. There were also rampant ransacks of politicians’ homes,
prolific book burnings (of any material deemed Marxist or pro-Allende), and kidnappings
of extreme leftists. During the following month, in what came to be known as “the
Caravan of Death,” General Arellano was ordered to travel the country inspecting the
political situation. As a result of his determinations, over 70 prisoners were subsequently
murdered.37

One of the main goals of the junta at this time was to completely eliminate the followers of the left, for which an extensive network of intimidation and repression was established. DINA was created in June 1974 to hunt down those trying to mount opposition, namely el Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (or MIR, the Movement of the Radical Left, which had been attributed with the organization of the expropriation of the haciendas).\(^38\) Prison camps with the ability to accommodate thousands were built, along with torture centers. Assassinations and "disappearances" occurred with alarming frequency, interrogations were conducted by the DINA and military at will, and indiscriminate incarcerations of people in the slums took place whenever anyone was outside after curfew. Mass exile also took root, with an estimated 200,000 Chileans forced to leave the country and relocate (primarily to Europe, the U.S., and other parts of Latin America), for political reasons between 1973 and 1988, nearly two percent of the entire population at the time.\(^39\) In fact, one in every ten families faced some sort of detention, exile, or arrest during the first year and a half of the regime.\(^40\)

Torture, unfortunately, was one of the regime's favorite tools for punishing and eliminating opposition. One of the characteristics of a "culture of terror," in fact, includes such semi-secret state actions as torture centers. In 1975, there were 11 known DINA torture centers in Santiago, most of which were unused homes. Two of the most prominent of these institutions were Villa Grimaldi and Clinica Londres, where torture victims were taken to heal them enough to be able to withstand more.\(^41\) The scope of torture methods used regularly according to testimonies from victims who survived is

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\(^38\) Chile: The Pinochet Decade – The Rise and Fall of the Chicago Boys. London: Latin American Bureau, 1983. (48-49)


both vast and horrific. Examples of psychological and physical torture experienced included sleep deprivation, withholding food, threats upon family members, mock executions, watching loved ones tortured, forced consumption of garbage and excrement, near-asphyxiation with bags, head submerged in oil or urine, electrodes placed on or in body (such as the face, genitals, or anus), "la parillada" ("the barbeque" – a metal cot rigged with electricity), teeth broken with stones and hammers, and rapes by police or trained dogs. The barbaric intensity of these tortures was such that most prisoners broke down and signed false confessions of alleged crimes, stated that they were treated well, and gave away their friends as additional targets. One of the most notorious cases of torture was that of Dr. Sheila Cassidy, a British surgeon working in Chile who was arrested by the DINA and taken to Villa Grimaldi. She was one of the victims of la parillada.

"During the first interrogation I never knew where the electrodes had been placed and the pain was generalized. Now they became more sophisticated for one electrode was placed inside my vagina and the other, a wandering pincer, was used to stimulate me wherever they chose…. I don’t remember a moment in which I decided to talk but I know that after a while it seemed less likely that my friends would be killed and therefore less urgent to lie. Indeed, I found it quite impossible to lie for the shocks came with such frequency and intensity that I could no longer think…. Unable to cry out and with my hands nearly paralyzed I could call out only through the upward movement of my finger and this they ignored, filling me with a desperation the like of which I have never known."42

Despite the frequency with which they occurred, however, many Chileans either could not or did not want to believe that such atrocities were taking place in their nation and chose to view them as fiction. Members of the political right were firmly convinced that they were stories invented by the opposition to sabotage the regime, and many members of the left simply preferred to believe they weren’t true because it meant they did not have the moral responsibility to put themselves at risk to stop them. The

combined practices of torture, disappearance, detention, and assassination, along with the possibility that these acts could be fabricated due to the nature of information gathering (through rumor and word of mouth), thus seem to have had the desired effect. Intense fear and intimidation squelched any true attempts to organize a rebellion and effectively silenced any protests the public might have otherwise voiced.

The international community, for its part, did little to remedy the situation. Though the government was repeatedly condemned by organizations such as the United Nations, the World Court, and the Organization of American States for the massive human rights violations, nothing was truly done to follow through. Much of the world shared the view of the Chilean citizens that the reports of torture and brutality must at least be exaggerated. Some events, however, could not be denied. Between 1974 and 1976, DINA was responsible for three attempted assassinations of political enemies on foreign soil (two of them successful). The third, in 1976, resulted in the death of Orlando Letelier, a former ambassador and cabinet member under Allende. He was killed by a car bomb while in Washington, D.C., and in the subsequent investigation and trial, DINA was implicated by a U.S. grand jury. In an effort to sustain some international support and lessen the damage, Pinochet closed most of the prison camps and dissolved DINA, though it was essentially reestablished under a different name (CNI, the National Information Agency). Despite the superficial progress, the injustices continued.

**True Colors Revealed**

Thus it was that the junta firmly established its dominance over the country by the time anyone truly realized the nature of the situation. Most had expected a "surgical,


short-term intervention followed by new elections,”45 not the demolition of their
dpolitical system and the instillation of a military dictator. Once in power, however,
Pinochet had no intentions of relinquishing it, and began to shape the country as he saw
fit. In an effort to maintain the illusion of legitimacy, the day of the coup the junta
declared a state of siege. This allowed them to place military courts in charge of war
crimes and basically keep the country under military rule.46 By December 1974,
Pinochet had maneuvered himself into the position of president-by-decree of Chile.47
The junta promptly began to modify laws as they saw fit, allowing Pinochet to renew the
state of siege every six months until 1978, and then a state of emergency every six
months thereafter until 1981. In this way, they could claim that Pinochet’s stay in power
and the dismissal of Congress were merely “temporary” and a necessary step to maintain
security.48 For years, the public believed that this was indeed the truth.

The strict government censorship that accompanied was an effort to legitimize the
government in the minds of the people, ban any Marxist ideas, keep the public unaware
of the magnitude of human abuse, as well as instill strict values of patriotism and
Catholic conservatism. Censorship was so complete, in fact, that even the use of the
word “companiero” was banned due to its strong association with Allende.49 The media
was rigorously controlled, school material subject to approval and complete revision
(subjects such as philosophy and political science were banned), and “proper attire”
firmly enforced (i.e.: women should not be allowed to wear slacks).50 Publications and
broadcasts with antipatriotic connotations or leftist views were thus prohibited, along

45-49 Wright, Thomas and Oñate, Rody. Flight from Chile: Voices from Exile. Albuquerque: University of New
Mexico Press, 1998. (xiv, 5)
Committee, 1983. (7-11)
50 Constable, Pamela and Valenzuela, Arturo. A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet. New York: W.W.
with critical plays and politically themed folklore music. Many artists were exiled due to their influence, and companies such as Radio Balmaceda and Radio Cooperativo were shut down because they allowed access to alternative types of information such as exiles' statements from abroad and updates on strikes. Based on these principals, failure to adhere to strict conservative morality and even the possession of leftist materials were punishable as crimes. The censorship also played a large part in the people's denial that their fellow citizens were being tortured and killed. If the papers did not mention any such occurrences and usually the only proof was gossip, life under a dictator became much easier to accept and live with if these accusations were brushed aside. Even today, those who still pledge their loyalty to Pinochet's legitimacy generally take the stance that the reports of torture and disappearances must be made up by the leftists or highly exaggerated. They simply cannot accept the possibility that such actions could have been possible in their civilized society.

The economic reforms were equally as dramatic as the harsh censorship. The long pursuit of industrialization was suddenly abandoned, putting emphasis instead upon the development of raw exports such as wine, fruit, and of course, copper. Private business was also once again encouraged, government expenditure cut by 27 percent, and import tariffs lowered to a flat 10 percent. The result was indeed a period of rapid economic growth, but only after a period of intense decline as real wages fell by 50 percent, social programs were steadily eliminated, and unemployment rose threefold to 19.8 percent in 1976. In many urban shantytowns, the level of unemployment was a staggering 80 percent, and prostitution and soup kitchens became the primary means of

survival for many. 52 1976 marked a turning point, however, and the country began experiencing promising growth, though it was illusory at best. As wages began to rise again and production increased, demand for products grew. The nation was unable to provide many material goods, however, after its regression to the focus on raw materials, meaning that imports steadily increased. A fixed exchange rate led to a 30 percent overvaluation of the peso by 1981, which in turn led to decreasing competitiveness of Chilean goods in the international market and high inflation rates. Thus, the nation was plunged into another recession shortly after its seeming recovery. 53

Winds of Change

This economic instability, coupled with growing international and internal pressure to legitimize the government and attempt to mend Chile’s bad reputation, led to the Constitution of 1980. Though a plebiscite was held to vote on the proposed document, many in the lower classes could not afford the new ID card needed to vote (which cost a full day’s wages), and the ballots were transparent so that one’s decision was easily known to the watching guards. The vast majority of voters, then, were either financially well-off or too intimidated to vote against the proposal, and it passed easily. 54

The most important aspect of the document was that it declared Pinochet president for an eight-year term, until March of 1989 (after it took effect in 1981), followed by a potential renewal of office for another eight years at that time.

This period was marked by a decrease in inflation and unemployment and moderate economic growth, which helped to calm the country relatively and gain the

dictator more support among the people. Confident that the coming plebiscite to determine whether or not his term in office would be extended would win him a *si* victory, Pinochet allowed everything to proceed smoothly. The year before the vote, a massive campaign was launched by the government to change his image from that of the harsh militant dictator to that of the caring, nationalistic, wise grandfather watching over the country. He shed his habitual military uniform, his trademark of the past two decades, in favor of indigenous clothing and miners’ helmets over his business suits as he shook hands with workers and kissed babies. He gave away free bicycles and helped families obtain decent housing on payment plans. Though not nearly as many homes were built as during the Allende years, Pinochet had a far better publicity team to make it appear as if things were on the rise. Despite these efforts, however, the dictator was voted out of office on October 5, 1988 by a vote of 54.7 percent to 43 percent. Though he would remain president for another 17 months until a candidate was elected, the general that had controlled a country with fear and intimidation had been defeated by his own overconfidence. Finally sensing the possibility of success in changing the government, the people found the courage to stand up to Pinochet and voice their disapproval. He announced his acceptance of the decision, though vowed that the new government would follow the guidelines set by the junta.

On December 14 1989, Patricio Aylwin won an absolute majority of 55.2 percent, making him the first democratically elected president in Chile since Allende’s 1970 victory. Despite his defeat for the presidency, however, Pinochet came far from losing influence over the nation. Contrary to the hopes of those jubilant about the result of the


plebiscite, Pinochet was able to step in to the role of commander-in-chief of the army once more, securing a place of power for himself despite the defeat. The intimidation of his presence subsequently led to the inability of the government to fully break away from the domination of the military, and furthermore, for the military to oppose the decisions he deemed best.

Pinochet did everything within his power to merge the image of himself with the military, thus thwarting criticism and shielding himself from potential attack. Even after his resignation as commander-in-chief in 1998, he remained “senator for life,” a position made possible by the 1980 Constitution, which allowed any former president to assume the role. Even after relinquishing command of first the country and then the armed forces, Pinochet maintained a position of influence. According to journalist Gregory Weeks, “Pinochet effectively impeded efforts to establish civilian supremacy of the armed forces, thus representing a major obstacle to the process of democratic consolidation in Chile.”

The Capture

Ironically, the man who had been considered both savior and villain, and nearly invincible for decades, was made the guinea pig of international politics with his arrest in London on 16 October 1998. He had traveled to England, a country with which he had traditionally enjoyed strong support, in order to have surgery on a herniated disk in his spinal cord. The 82-year-old man, now fragile with age and already possessing a pacemaker, was unable to be moved for transport from his hospital room for fear of complications and was thus kept under strict surveillance until his ability to be put on

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house arrest in London. The warrant was issued by Interpol on behalf of Spain on charges of murder and torture of Spanish citizens. It marked the first time in history that a former head of state traveling on a diplomatic passport had been apprehended in a foreign country.63

Reactions to his arrest mirrored public opinion during his time in office. Many, especially those whom had lost loved ones as a result of the military regime, were ecstatic, convinced that he would finally be forced to pay for the crimes committed under his command. Conservatives around the world cried out, however, led by Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, to whom Pinochet had been a powerful ally during its war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands in 1982.64 After a series of hearings and overturned rulings in Britain, Pinochet was extradited to Spain and there indicted, though he was eventually returned to Chile in March of 2000 due to medical reasons. Though he received a warm welcome from the armed forces, whom pledged their unwavering support for the former commander despite his arrest,65 charges were eventually reinstated and Pinochet put under house arrest on 29 January 2001.66 The charges were again dropped on 1 July 2002, however, on the grounds that he was too ill to continue trial.67

The Means

It is in his homecoming that modern perceptions of Pinochet are most clearly demonstrated. A man persecuted internationally for human rights abuses still remains a hero in the eyes of half of the citizens whose lives were governed by the politics of fear and oppression for nearly two decades. Even now, after the lines of communication and

information have been opened and the historical facts so long kept hidden now revealed, people refuse to believe that such horrific events truly took place. Their prejudice marks Pinochet as the liberator that saved the country from the Marxist devil, and they therefore refuse to acknowledge the actions that would condemn him and themselves for not doing anything to stop the abuse.

In examining Pinochet's acquisition of and time in power, it seems apparent that this was one of the largest factors that enabled the junta to succeed. Obviously, the economic instability and ensuing social chaos of the Allende presidency left the nation ready for a change. The international community also played a part in allowing the regime to occur, first by aiding in the sabotage of the economy, then by standing back and refusing to insist that the human rights violations be stopped. If the mentality of the international community had not been so blinded by the black-and-white world of the Cold War, then it's undeniable that the coup would have had great difficulty gathering popular support. It can even be argued that the coup may never have even been considered in the first place, if the residual effects of the "Red Scare" had not put an all-encompassing fear of communism into the heart of the democratic world. It was this condemnation of Marxism that fueled the opposition to Allende, and subsequently the basis of justification for the violence that ensued with his overthrow. Ironically, people preferred to have the government abolished and their lives run by fear under a dictator than have a socialist president elected by popular vote, because *that* was the true threat to democracy.

The politics of terror established by the junta worked in conjunction with this mentality to effectively suppress any remaining opposition. Those who had favored
socialism were too intimidated to do anything about the situation, and most of the population remained ignorant through lack of proper information. Thus, they feared the truth and accepted the lie that the injustices were not truly happening. Though Chileans may have been unaware that a dictator would be installed once the elected president had been eliminated, they were also unwilling to admit that it was a step in the wrong direction. Power may not have been restored to the conservative parties as they had assumed would happen, but at least the country would not fall to Marxist control. This comforting thought, the lesser of two evils, along with the culture of fear established to subdue the nation, enabled them to overlook the suffering of their fellow citizens and see Chile not as a country repressed, but rather a nation saved.

The importance of recognizing these factors is that Chile was not an easy victim. It did not have a history of military violence, nor political instability. Only the United States can claim a longer period of democracy in this hemisphere, and the citizens of Chile are some of the most educated in all of Latin America. Thus, it was not ignorance or political structure that led them to a dictatorship, but rather unfortunate circumstances that led to the refusal of the people to acknowledge the true situation. This thought is disturbing because it illustrates the vulnerability of all nations. Democracies are not inherently immune to military overthrows or human rights abuses. Chile serves as a warning to peoples everywhere to open their eyes and survey the events around them so that another nation is not forced to live through another such regime.
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