

Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Kristian Gustafson. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007. 317 pages, notes, bibliography, and index.

Reviewed by David Robarge

CIA's operation to attempt to affect a national election in Chile in 1970 and its consequences have engendered more persistent controversy, and more polemic and scholarship, than any of the more than one dozen covert actions with which the Agency has acknowledged involvement. Although some cost more and lasted longer (Tibet, Laos), entailed intervening in the domestic affairs of European allies (France, Italy), had greater long-term geopolitical impact (Iran, Afghanistan 1979–87), or were more acutely embarrassing in their execution and outcome (the Bay of Pigs), CIA's presidentially mandated effort to prevent Salvadore Allende de Gossens from becoming the first elected socialist president of a Western Hemispheric nation soon cast a shadow on the Agency's reputation that lingers nearly four decades later. A few years ago, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke for many critics of US policy toward Chile when he said "It is not a part of American history that we're proud of."^[i]

This stigma on CIA has endured largely because of the interplay of ideological romanticism, political disillusionment, and institutional energy on the part of detractors of the anti-Allende covert action, who have

dominated the historiography on the subject. According to Peter Kornbluh, director of the Chile declassification project at the National Security Archive,

The Via Chilena—peaceful road to socialist reform—captured the imagination of progressive forces around the globe.... The sharp contrast between the peaceful nature of Allende’s program for change, and the violent coup that left him dead and Chile’s long-standing democratic institutions destroyed, truly shocked the world.... In the United States, Chile joined Vietnam on the front line of the national conflict over the corruption of American values in the making and exercise of US foreign policy.^[ii]

There it has remained, principally because of to the efforts of a community of human rights activists, left-wing scholars and intellectuals, and antisecrecy advocates that emerged in the early 1970s while the Cold War consensus inside the United States was fracturing. The members of this subculture—the boundaries between them are often porous—are dedicated to uncovering evidence about the police-state tactics of Gen. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, who succeeded Allende after a military coup in 1973, and to seeking justice for the victims of his often brutal 17-year dictatorship. The National Security Archive, for example, is up front about its motive for aggressively using the Freedom of Information Act and civil lawsuits to extract thousands of pages of documents from CIA and other US government agencies to “force more of the still-buried record into the public domain—providing evidence for future judicial and historical accountability.”^[iii]

The Chilean operation galvanized CIA’s congressional critics at the same time. In 1973, a Senate subcommittee on multinational corporations, led by Sen. Frank Church, investigated contacts between the Agency and the International Telephone and Telegraph Company, a prime target for nationalization under Allende. It was the first public hearing ever held on covert action and resulted in a critical report that provided the first official account of one aspect of the coup. Two years later, Church’s select investigatory committee conducted more public hearings and produced another (unfavorable) survey of CIA’s operations in Chile.^[iv]

Then in 1976, Chilean intelligence operatives murdered Allende’s foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, and an associate in Washington, DC. To

Pinochet's opponents, that brazen action demonstrated the bankruptcy of US policy toward Chile that CIA had helped implement. How could the United States support a regime so ruthless that it would commit terrorism in its largest patron's capital? More than ever in the minds of writers on this subject, the Agency became identified with the regime's origins and hence charged with some responsibility for its actions, including the deaths or "disappearances" of thousands of people in Chile and, through the notorious Condor program, in other Latin American countries.^[v] The notion that CIA was at least partly to blame for whatever happened after its failed attempt to keep Allende out of power became a leitmotif of most historical treatments of US intelligence activities in the region.

The Reagan administration—partly because of the influence of UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick's arguments about the reformability of authoritarian states—took a more benign view of the Pinochet regime and further inspired its critics to seek a full accounting of Agency involvement in Chile. They received a huge boon from the Clinton administration, which, having already authorized sizable releases of secret material on Central America and under pressure from Congress and the anti-Pinochet lobby, undertook the Chile Declassification Project that eventually yielded around 24,000 never-before-seen documents from CIA, the White House and National Security Council, the Defense and State Departments, and the FBI.^[vi] In response to a congressional requirement in the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1999, CIA issued a white paper in September 2000 entitled *CIA Activities in Chile*.^[vii] The report concluded that the Agency was not involved in Allende's death during the 1973 coup, that it supported the military junta afterward but did not help Pinochet assume the presidency, and that it reported information about human rights abuses and admonished its Chilean assets against such behavior according to the guidance in effect at the time.

That scarcely settled the matter. The issue of US-Chilean relations and the legacy of CIA's intervention stayed prominent during the next several years through a succession of events that included the Chilean government's efforts to get Pinochet (then living in Europe) extradited and put on trial; the uncovering of his secret multi-million-dollar accounts in a Washington, DC, bank; a Chilean legislature investigation of CIA's role in the coup; huge lawsuits filed by Chilean citizens against Henry Kissinger (national security adviser and later secretary of state during 1969-77) and the US government for damages in connection with deaths and human rights abuses by the Pinochet regime; and a contretemps over Kissinger allegedly

pressuring the Council on Foreign Relations to squelch a CFR fellow who wrote a favorable review of Kornbluh's book *The Pinochet File in Foreign Affairs*.^[viii]

Pinochet's death in December 2006 brought no closure to the long debate over CIA intervention in Chile and its legacy. The discussion essentially remains polarized between left and right,^[ix] and for some time an objective narrative of the facts and a fair-minded analysis of the critical and apologetic perspectives have been sorely missed. Such is the landmark contribution of Kristian Gustafson's *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964–1974*, which must be considered the indispensable study in the large bibliography on that seemingly intractable subject. A former student of Professor Christopher Andrew's at Cambridge University and now a lecturer at Brunel University in England, Gustafson previewed some of his findings in this journal in 2003.^[x] In *Hostile Intent*, he demonstrates in an orderly and comprehensive way, with a good grasp of Chilean politics and full facility with the now substantial documentary record, how US administrations carried out their Chilean policy founded on the concern stated as early as 1958 by the senior State Department official responsible for Latin America that "were Allende to win we would be faced with a pro-Soviet, anti-U.S. administration in one of the most important countries in the hemisphere."^[xi]

One of the strengths of Gustafson's book is that in the course of recounting the often-told story of how Washington tried to prevent that from happening, he takes on prevailing misconceptions and provides details that add meaning to familiar material.

- Instead of reflexively supporting the right wing as it had elsewhere in Latin America during the latter 1960s and well into 1970, Washington had CIA channel assistance to an increasingly marginalized group of centrists at a time when Chilean politics was growing more polarized—a development that US analysts missed.
- Notwithstanding recurrent rhetoric about Chile being a cornerstone of US policy in the region, White House oversight of covert action planning was strikingly haphazard, and CIA and the State Department went about their business operating under inconsistent premises, sometimes supporting the same parties and politicians, sometimes not, for different reasons.
- Besides State having previously opposed intervening in the 1970 election, another important reason why Richard Nixon kept the US ambassador, Edward M. Korry, out of the loop on the coup plotting in September and

October 1970 (also known as Track II) was that he distrusted Korry's politics. The ambassador was a Kennedy Democrat and supporter of Chilean politicians who had benefited from the Kennedy administration's Alliance for Progress.

- Despite Kissinger's ominous admonition to Nixon in November 1970 that "your decision as to what to do about it [Allende's election] may be the most historic and difficult foreign affairs decision you will have to make this year," and the enunciation by the National Security Council of a "publicly cool and correct posture toward Chile,"^[xii] the administration's guidance on both covert and overt activities was slow and erratic during the next two years even as the Allende government fell deeper into economic and political trouble and became increasingly unstable.
- After the September 1973 coup that ousted Allende—in which CIA had no role and about which it knew little beforehand—Washington let the Agency continue supporting the center-left Christian Democratic Party, and the Agency's head of Latin American operations argued against the cutoff that went into effect at the end of the year. He and other CIA officers contended that the subsidy was needed to counter the left if the junta relinquished power and to "maintain our capability for influencing the junta and molding public opinion" if it did not.^[xiii]

Gustafson's study makes a crucial point about covert action that policymakers and intelligence practitioners would do well to learn: for political operations to succeed, they must have time to work and must be coordinated with the overt aspects of policy and all elements of the country team. Those conditions existed in the 1960s, and the Agency helped accomplish Washington's objective of keeping Chile in what it perceived as safe, center-right hands. In contrast, throughout most of 1970 "the United States was perpetually one move behind the political evolutions in Santiago."^[xiv] By the time the Nixon administration suddenly took notice of events in Chile after the first round of elections in September and then went into panic mode, CIA had few resources and less time to stem the tide moving in the socialists' favor. Nixon and Kissinger ordered it to undertake a back-channel coup plot that failed disastrously and assured Allende's victory. As Gustafson concludes:

Rather than operating on their own, covert actions in 1964 were used to bolster overt plans such as the Alliance for Progress. Thus they acted as a force multiplier for U.S. foreign policy goals. In October 1970, covert action was separated from any strategic thinking and uselessly sent charging into the brick wall of immovable Chilean public opinion.^[xv]

Thus another lesson from the Chilean covert action is that political operations will most likely work when they reinforce trends and do not try to create them or shift them in other directions.

Hostile Intent is marred by some minor errors of style and fact. Occasionally Gustafson's prose takes on a slightly turgid, dissertationesque quality; he misuses some words (disinterested for uninterested, reticent for reluctant); credits Rep. Otis Pike with the "rogue elephant" charge instead of Senator Church; mentions the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence several years before it was created; overlooks the fact that the 1980 Intelligence Oversight Act superseded the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment's requirements for reporting covert actions to Congress; and misidentifies the State Department official in the first photograph of the insert section. More substantively, Gustafson uses material acquired from the KGB archives in the early 1990s in a way that suggests it was available to US officials at the time. But these small problems should not distract readers from realizing Gustafson's achievement after entering such a politically and emotionally charged environment. If it is true, as Kornbluh claims, that "after so many years, Chile remains the ultimate case study of morality—the lack of it—in the making of US foreign policy,"^[xvi] then a scholarly and dispassionate contribution to the literature such as *Hostile Intent* is all the more to be valued.

Footnotes

[i]"Chile Cheers Powell Remarks on 1973 Coup," Reuters, a1147, 22 February 2003.

[ii]Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: The New Press, 2003), xiii, xiv.

[iii]Kornbluh, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 8, "Chile and the United States: Declassified Documents Relating to the Military Coup, September 11, 1973," on National Security Archive Web site at <<http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/nsaebb8i.htm>>.

[iv]L. Britt Snider, *The Agency and the Hill: CIA's Relationship with Congress, 1946-2004* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2008),

271–73; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Multinational Corporations, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, *The International Telephone and Telegraph Company and Chile, 1970–1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973); *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate, 94th Congress, 1st Session, Volume 7, Covert Action* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

[v]On Condor—a Pinochet-initiated collaboration with neighboring governments' intelligence services to quell radical subversion throughout the region, often through violent means and occasionally abroad—see John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

[vi]*Pinochet File*, xvi–xvii.

[vii]Available on the Agency's public Web site at <<https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/index.html>>.

[viii]“Pinochet Indicted on Human Rights Charges,” <<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/americas/12/13/chile.pinochet.ap.index.f>> 13 December 2004; Terence O'Hara, “The General and His Banker,” *Washington Post*, 21 March 2005: E1, 9; “CIA Activities in Chile to Be Investigated,” Associated Press story on <<http://www.nytimes.com>>, 7 October 2004; Kenneth Maxwell, “The Other 9/11: The United States and Chile, 1973,” *Foreign Affairs* 82:6 (Nov.–Dec. 2003): 147; Lynne Duke, “A Plot Thickens,” *Washington Post*, 27 February 2005: D1, 6–7.

[ix]At the other end of the spectrum from Kornbluh's *Pinochet File* are Mark Falcoff, *Modern Chile, 1970–1989: A Critical History* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1989) and idem, “Kissinger & Chile: The Myth That Will Not Die,” *Commentary* 116:4 (Nov. 2003): 41–49.

[x]“CIA Machinations in Chile in 1970,” *Studies in Intelligence* 47 no. 3 (2002): 35–49. The article received the Walter L. Pforzheimer Award given for the best undergraduate or graduate paper on an intelligence-related subject submitted to *Studies* during 2002.

[xi]Roy Richard Rubottom, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, quoted in *Hostile Intent* on page 19. Prof. Andrew (with Vasily Mitrokhin) has described the KGB's relationship with Allende and its involvement in Chile during the 1960s and 1970s in *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books,

2005), 69–88.

[xii] Kissinger memorandum to Nixon, 6 November 1970, and National Security Decision Memorandum 93, 9 November 1970, quoted in *Hostile Intent*, 139, 145.

[xiii] *Ibid.*, 233.

[xiv] *Ibid.*, 111.

[xv] *Ibid.*, 133–34.

[xvi] *Pinochet File*, xv.

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.