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Augusto Pinochet and the Conservative Threat to America

by Jacob G. Hornberger

While some people might believe that those on the Left wing of the political spectrum pose the bigger threat to the freedom and well-being of the American people, nothing could be further from the truth. Today, the much bigger threat (Read [here](#) and [here](#)) comes instead from the Right wing or conservative side of the political spectrum, for it is the conservatives who are either indifferent to — or squarely in favor of — military rule, torture, and suspension of habeas corpus and civil liberties for suspected terrorists. And those things constitute a much more ominous threat to our freedom and well-being than anything leftists endorse. (Of course, in fairness to the truth, there are leftists who endorse violations of civil liberties — or simply look the other way — when such violations are committed by leftist officials, two notable examples being Janet Reno and Fidel Castro.)

A good example of the conservative mindset — and the threat that it currently poses to the American people — lies with the brutal military regime of Chilean strongman Gen. Augusto Pinochet, an army general who, with the support of the U.S. CIA, ousted the democratically elected president of Chile and took power in a coup d'état in 1973. While the Bush administration often suggests that the U.S. “war on terrorism” is something new, the fact is that the “war on terrorism” was the central element of General Pinochet’s 17 years of brutal military rule in Chile.

Pinochet’s “war on terrorism” entailed all the features of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” — torture, murder, sex abuse, denial of civil liberties, indefinite detentions, “renditions,” and disappearances of suspected terrorists.

(“[Renditioning](#)” is a top-secret U.S. policy by which U.S. officials have been [delivering suspected terrorists](#) to friendly authoritarian regimes, presumably for the purpose of torture and possibly even execution so that U.S. officials can maintain “clean hands” with respect to what is done to the victim.)

Throughout those infamous and frightening 17 years of Pinochet’s rule, U.S. conservatives pooh-poohed Pinochet’s horrific human-rights abuses, choosing instead to hail his “free-enterprise” economic policies (some of which actually bore a remarkable resemblance to Benito

Mussolini's fascist economic policies). Embracing the point made famous by Lenin, the U.S. conservative attitude toward Pinochet's horrific human-rights violations was that, to make an omelet, it was sometimes necessary to break a few eggs. In Pinochet's case, that meant some 3,000 human beings executed (after being brutally tortured) and some 30,000 brutally tortured, all for the sake of ousting a democratically elected socialist and possibly even pro-communist regime and replacing it with an unelected and brutal military regime that supposedly would bring "free enterprise" to Chile.

The Chilean example provides many important lessons about U.S. conservatives that the American people ignore at their peril.

The so-called commitment to democracy that U.S. officials have used to justify their invasion and war of aggression against the people of Iraq is hogwash. Federal officials no more have a commitment to democracy than did, well, Augusto Pinochet, whose installation into office U.S. officials and U.S. conservatives enthusiastically embraced. After all, what better example than the U.S. attitude toward democracy than what happened in Chile?

In 1970 the Chilean people elected a socialist and avowed Marxist, [Salvador Allende](#), to be their president. (Conservatives, both Chilean and American, accused Allende of planning to turn Chile into a communist dictatorship, an accusation that Allende repeatedly denied.)

Upon Allende's election, Republican President Richard Nixon immediately issued an order to his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, to do whatever was necessary to oust the democratically elected Allende from office, even if that meant violating the democratic will of the Chilean people by installing an unelected military regime in Chile. The CIA's unsuccessful attempt to prevent Allende from taking office resulted in the murder of a high Chilean general, not that that bothered many people within the U.S. government.

While it is still impossible to know all the things that the CIA did to oust Allende from office three years later (the CIA still refuses to open all its files in the matter — "national security," of course), there is no doubt that U.S. officials from the president on down, along with their U.S. conservative supporters, enthusiastically embraced Allende's violent ouster from office and his replacement by Pinochet's brutal military regime. (By the end of the coup, Allende and many others were dead.)

Instigating a "war on terrorism" that would last almost two decades, Pinochet and his military minions immediately began rounding up "terrorists" and brutally torturing them and executing them. Included among the "terrorists" who were executed were two American left-wing intellectuals, Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi. The eagerness of U.S. officials to accept Pinochet's false explanations of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of these two Americans indirectly contributed to Pinochet's cover-up of their murders. As it turned out, Pinochet's henchmen had executed Horman in a Santiago stadium immediately following the coup. And some 30 years after their deaths, the CIA has [finally admitted](#) that it might even have played a role

in Horman's murder, although it refuses to specify exactly how. Again, the CIA steadfastly refuses to open all its files in the matter on the ground that the security of the United States would be placed in jeopardy through the disclosure of such files. (Horman's death was the subject of the movie "[Missing](#)" which starred Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek.)

(For excellent accounts of the Pinochet coup and the role that U.S. officials played in it, along with a good description of how the Pinochet and U.S. governments worked closely together in the years after the coup, I highly recommend two books, both of which form the basis for much of this article: [The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents](#), by John Dinges, and [The Pinochet File: A Declassified File on Atrocity and Accountability](#), by Peter Kornbluh.)

Harking back to Hitler's Gestapo and Stalin's KGB, Pinochet set up one of the most frightening organizations of state-sponsored terror ever devised. Called the DINA, it was a secret organization consisting of torturers and executioners who, like their German and Soviet counterparts, honestly believed that they were patriotic government officials who were serving their country, as they tortured and executed their victims. Over the succeeding years, DINA and the CIA would maintain a close working relationship, not only because the head of DINA had received training from the U.S. military but also because the CIA liked receiving the information that was being extracted by the DINA torturers.

Unfortunately, DINA's torture and execution chambers were not limited to Chile. Given that military regimes were ruling in such nearby South American countries as Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, DINA became a cross-border cooperative venture in which the military regimes would track down and arrest each other's "terrorists." Once arrested, the DINA agents from the captive's home country would be invited to enter the country to torture and execute their own citizens or the victim would be "renditioned" to his home country for torture and execution.

Who was a Chilean "terrorist"? At first, it was anyone who took up arms against the Pinochet military regime — that is, those who didn't meekly submit to a violent military takeover of their country — those who were violently resisting Pinochet's military dictatorship, including communist terrorists.

It wasn't long, however, before the paranoia that customarily afflicts military regimes led to the arrest, torture, and execution of thousands of people who *peacefully* opposed military regimes and *peacefully* promoted the restoration of democracy and civil liberties to Chile, including officials who had served in the Allende administration.

U.S. conservatives have long justified the Pinochet regime on the ground that Allende's socialist economic policies (and, conservatives claimed, Allende's communist aims) were anti-freedom and threatened the economic well-being of the Chilean people. Therefore, to avoid a socialist president and possibly another communist regime in this hemisphere (Cuba, of course, being the other), conservatives claimed that it was entirely proper for the Chilean military (and

the U.S. government) to disregard the democratic electoral results and violently oust Allende from office, installing a military regime that might even bring “free enterprise” policies to Chile.

Yet, for the past several decades, the American people have democratically elected people to public office who believe in the same socialist policies that Allende believed in: Social Security (which originated among pre-Hitler German socialists), Medicare, Medicaid, public (i.e., government) schooling, welfare, public works, income taxation, coercive redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, business subsidies, foreign aid, and the like. For that matter, all these U.S. socialist programs (which U.S. conservatives today embrace) are also primary features of Fidel Castro’s socialist and communist system.

Was Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal any different in principle from Allende’s economic platform? How about Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society? Roosevelt, you’ll recall, had even confiscated and nationalized the gold holdings of the American people. As a socialist, Allende believed in the Marxian principle of coercive redistribution of wealth from rich to poor. So did Johnson — that’s what his “war on poverty” was all about.

Would the election of Roosevelt and Johnson and the adoption of their socialist policies have morally justified a military takeover of America to restore free enterprise to our country? Or would we prefer that such ideological changes be accomplished through the normal democratic processes?

As harmful and destructive as socialist economic policies are, they pale in comparison to the omnipotent power to kill, torture, and disappear people that come with military rule. Seeing your wealth taxed and given to others is bad. Seeing your economic activities regulated is bad. But when military officials have the unfettered power to take you into custody, torture you, and execute you, it’s the end of the story for freedom in that society. As Chileans under Pinochet discovered — indeed as Russians under Stalin and Germans under Hitler discovered — there is no peaceful way to change the system once you’re dead.

That’s why it has been said, for example, that habeas corpus — the right to challenge the government’s detention of you in a court of law — is the true lynchpin of a free society. To belabor the obvious, if there is no right to habeas corpus in a society, there is nothing standing in the way of the military in that society to seize, torture, and execute the citizenry at will, except for the “good faith” of the military, for what that’s worth, especially during a severe “crisis,” when the military honestly believes that the “terrorists” or the “communists” are threatening to take over the country. A [good example](#) was the famous terrorist strike on the German Reichstag, which led to the decision by Germany’s elected representatives to “temporarily” suspend civil liberties and grant their chancellor, Adolf Hitler, “emergency powers” to deal with the terrorist and communist crisis.

Have conservatives taken America in the direction of the Pinochet regime that they hailed and celebrated for so long? How can anyone doubt it? Torture; indefinite detentions; murders; sex

abuse; “renditions”; indefinite detentions; military tribunals; and denial of habeas corpus, due process of law, trial by jury, and judicial supremacy. And just as they did during the Pinochet regime, U.S. conservatives are looking the other way while all this is going on — even claiming it’s necessary, all the while hailing and celebrating Bush’s “free-enterprise” policies.

President Bush is claiming the same power that Pinochet claimed — the power to arrest, torture, and kill “terrorists,” not just inside the country, but all over the world. It was, in fact, Pinochet, not Bush, who first developed the concept that the entire world was a battlefield in the “war on terrorism.” This is what motivated Pinochet to send DINA agents (one of whom perceived himself to be a James Bond) to Europe and the United States to assassinate “terrorists.”

It was in fact, Pinochet’s “the world is the battleground” mindset that motivated him to send DINA agents to Washington, D.C., to execute former Allende cabinet member [Orlando Letelier](#) on the streets of Washington, D.C., in 1976. In Pinochet’s mind — indeed, in the minds of many of his conservative supporters — Letelier was a “terrorist” because he was doing everything he could to bring down the Pinochet regime, especially by lobbying U.S. congressmen to cut off U.S. foreign aid to the Pinochet regime.

Fortunately, there have been those whose conscience and consciousness enabled them to see things differently. They correctly perceived Pinochet and DINA officials to be the terrorists — state terrorists. They correctly recognized the right of people to peacefully resist a military regime, especially an anti-democratic regime that has gained power through the violent ouster of a democratically elected regime. Nothing — not even “free-enterprise, Chicago-boys” economic policies — can excuse that sort of state-sponsored thuggery.

That’s why people in the libertarian section of the political spectrum, unlike those in the conservative quadrant, have long supported the criminal indictment of Pinochet and his DINA minions — because terror in the name of fighting terror is a grave criminal offense against humanity no matter what economic philosophy the state terrorist happens to hold. (Pinochet left office in 1990. In 2000 — almost 30 years after the Chilean people democratically elected a socialist, Salvador Allende, president — the Chilean people [democratically elected another self-avowed socialist](#), Ricardo Lagos, president of their country. A few days ago — January 4, 2005, Chile’s Supreme Court [upheld a criminal indictment](#) brought against Gen. Augusto Pinochet for murder and kidnappings.)

What danger does the U.S. conservative mindset that supported Pinochet and his military regime pose to us Americans? Well, here it is, bluntly and directly: CIA and Pentagon officials are now arresting, torturing, and disappearing (i.e., “renditioning”) people in different parts of the world, just as Pinochet was doing.

Explicitly opposing torture in public pronouncements, as Pinochet publicly did, they express their ambivalence toward torture not only through the “renditions”, but also through their

appointment of high federal officials who have implicitly or explicitly condoned or approved torture to high federal positions of power.

And now we learn that U.S. officials are planning to form [death squads and kidnapping squads](#) in Iraq to fight the “terrorists,” just as Pinochet and DINA did in South America.

“But I don’t need to worry about Bush, the CIA, and the Pentagon,” one might say. “I’m an American and therefore I have nothing to worry about.”

Oh? Not only is the morality of that position questionable, try telling it to [Jose Padilla](#), an American citizen whom the Pentagon arrested on American soil and accused of terrorism. He’s been denied due process of law and trial by jury, and the U.S. military is saying that it has the unfettered military power to punish, even execute, him as a “terrorist” who was captured on the “battlefield” of the world, which includes the Chicago, Illinois, airport, where he was taken into custody. It is the same position that Pinochet took when he sent DINA agents to kill Orlando Letelier on the streets of Washington, D.C.

“But it’s only one American, and he’s some Hispanic named Jose Padilla. They’re not going to come after any of us Anglo-Americans.”

The people in the CIA and the Pentagon are not stupid. They know that if they begin rounding up hundreds or thousands of domestic “terrorists,” as Pinochet did, before having secured a favorable judicial ruling authorizing them to do so, large numbers of detainees, tortures, and executions would prejudice their chances in the courts. Thus, even while they’ve rounding up untold numbers of foreigners, they’ve limited their domestic roundups so far to one unsympathetic American arrested here in the United States — Jose Padilla.

But they know what every lawyer knows — if they can secure one favorable and definitive ruling that keeps the federal courts from interfering with their arrest and incarceration of Jose Padilla, there will then be no further obstacles to their expanding their Gulag operations at Guantanamo to include American “terrorists.” After all, the reason that the Pentagon has not sent Americans to Guantanamo is not based in law but rather in discretion — they’re being nice until they secure that favorable judicial ruling in the Padilla case.

Do you remember when the feds [fired a missile](#) at an American “terrorist” who was traveling in Yemen, killing him and his fellow passengers? That’s the Pinochet mindset in action: In the “war on terrorism,” the entire world is the battlefield, which means that it’s okay to kill (or torture) terrorists, Americans or foreigners, wherever they might be found. After all, a “terrorist” is a “terrorist,” right? Does it make any difference whether he’s Iraqi, Saudi, Chilean, or American? Isn’t he just as dangerous?

That’s what guided Pinochet to torture and kill “terrorists,” wherever they might be found, and it’s what guides U.S. officials to do the same thing. It’s what guided the DINA to kill Orlando Letelier on the streets of Washington, D.C., and it’s what guided the CIA to kill an American “terrorist” in Sudan. It’s what guided Pinochet, the DINA, and the Chilean military to arrest,

torture, and disappear people in Chile and elsewhere, and it's what has guided Bush, the CIA, and the Pentagon to arrest, torture, disappear, and "rendition" people in different parts of the world.

In other words, if the Pentagon secures a favorable ruling in the Padilla case, there will be nothing — repeat nothing — to prevent the Pentagon from indiscriminately arresting Americans, transporting them to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, torturing them, detaining them indefinitely, and executing them. Just as under Pinochet.

Of course, no one would question the propriety of punishing people who have committed terrorist acts. That's, in fact, one of the legitimate roles of government. But there's a right way to do it and there's a wrong way. And the Pinochet-Bush way is the wrong way.

What U.S. conservatives have historically failed to recognize is the vital importance of civil liberties to a free society. That's why they always mock and make fun of our "constitutional rights." It's why, in fact, they supported the Pentagon's setting up of its torture camp in Cuba — they saw it as a cute way to avoid the constraints of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It's why they call brutal military rule in Iraq — which has entailed curfews, indefinite detentions, unreasonable searches and seizures, rule by decree, torture, sex abuse, rape, and murder — "freedom" and "liberation."

There is only one proper way to determine whether someone has committed a terrorist act or any other criminal offense — and that's through normal civilian-run judicial processes, especially those set forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. These include a grand-jury indictment (i.e., the right to be informed of the charges against you), right to counsel, trial by jury, and due process of law.

To belabor the obvious, the idea is that by following established judicial procedures of due process against persons accused of a crime, the chances of punishing, even executing, an innocent person, such as Orlando Letelier —or perhaps the people whom the Pentagon [has released](#) from Guantanamo Bay after years of being denied due process of law — or even perhaps Jose Padilla — are significantly diminished.

With the adoption of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the United States established the finest legal system in history. It is a system which is different from every other in the world. It is one in which every American should take tremendous pride. Its principles stretch back all the way to Magna Carta, the Great Charter of England in 1215. Its guarantees and protections apply to everyone, American and foreigner alike, accused of a crime by the U.S. government. Those important rights and guarantees include the right to be informed of the charges against the accused, right to counsel, protection from unreasonable searches and seizures, habeas corpus, due process of law, right to confront one's accusers, and trial by jury.

As the great criminal defense attorney Edward Bennett Williams put it, "Civil liberties are a great heritage for Americans. They are not rights that the government gives to the people, they are the rights that the people carved out for themselves when they created the government."

We must ensure the continuation of our great American heritage of civil liberties. We owe to our predecessors. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to our progeny.

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