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Shades of Operation Condor

by Jacob G. Hornberger

The CIA's assassination plan, which it chose to keep secret from Congress, brings to mind [Operation Condor](#), a similar plan run by DINA, which was Chile's counterpart to the CIA under the dictatorial regime of military strongman Augusto Pinochet.

After Pinochet took power in a coup, his agents proceeded to round up communists and other opponents to his regime and torture, sexually abuse, rape, indefinitely incarcerate, and kill them, without any trials or due process of law. It was during that time, in fact, that the CIA, which supported Pinochet, played a role, as yet undetermined, in the murder of a young American journalist named [Charles Horman](#).

Pinochet knew that his war on communism, however, could not be limited to Chile, given that communists were located all over the world. Thus, Chile, along with other South American right-wing regimes, established Operation Condor, a secret program of assassination, torture, and political repression. According to Wikipedia, files discovered in 1992 in Paraguay revealed that Operation Condor succeeded in murdering 50,000 people, "disappearing" another 30,000, and incarcerating 400,000.

One day in 1976, however, Operation Condor hit a stumbling block here in the United States. As part of its global war on communism, it took out Chilean citizen [Orlando Letelier](#) with a car bomb that succeeded in killing not only him but also his American assistant, Ronni Moffitt. The killing took place on the streets of Washington, D.C.

What's wrong with that, you ask? Weren't Chile and the other members of Operation Condor involved in a major war? Didn't they have the right to kill the enemy, wherever the enemy happened to be found? Wasn't the entire world, including the United States, a battlefield in the global war on communism?

After all, what was different about the Letelier assassination and the CIA's [firing of a missile into a car](#) in 2002 in Yemen that was carrying suspected terrorists, including one who was an American citizen? Didn't the car in Yemen contain people who the CIA was sure were

terrorists or terrorist sympathizers? Didn't the car in Washington contain people that DINA was sure were communists or communist sympathizers, one of whom was a Chilean citizen?

There were some Americans who didn't feel that Operation Condor should be permitted to extend its global war on communism to the United States. Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt were murder victims, they argued. The wartime analogy was hogwash, they said. Letelier, after all, was really just a former member of the cabinet in Chile's Salvador Allende regime, which had been ousted in the Pinochet coup, who had continued his political battle against Pinochet's dictatorship in the United States.

The Operation Condor agents who killed Letelier and Moffitt were ultimately indicted for murder in a U.S. District Court in Washington.

As it turned out, the DINA agent who orchestrated the murder of Letelier and Moffitt was a man named [Michael Townley](#), who also — surprise, surprise — had worked for the CIA. Owing to public pressure, Townley was extradited to the United States to stand trial. The feds ultimately offered him a plea bargain that required him to testify against his underlings and that enabled him to live the rest of his life here in the United States under the federal witness protection program.

Assuming the CIA is telling the truth in its claim that it never carried out its assassination program, did the CIA factor in the Letelier-Moffitt case in deciding not to carry through with its assassination program? Perhaps. After all, if CIA assassins were to be arrested in a foreign country and indicted for murder, how would they be able to distinguish what they did from what Operation Condor did to Letelier and Moffitt?

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