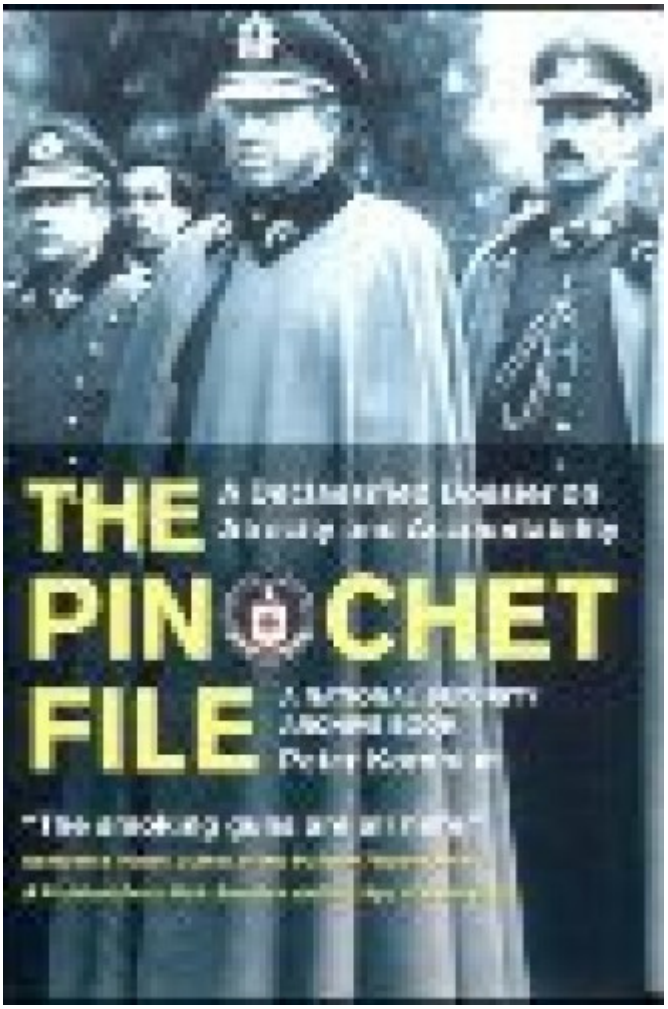
# Torture chamber

By Kenneth P. Serbin in the January 11, 2005 issue

## In Review


### The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents

John Dinges
New Press




## The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability

Peter Kornbluh, ed.
New Press

Visiting Villa Grimaldi in Santiago, Chile, left me with much the same chill I felt at Dachau, the former Nazi concentration camp outside Munich. Under dictator General Augusto Pinochet the Chilean military tortured some 4,500 people at Villa Grimaldi. A guide shows visitors the spot where military vehicles drove over the legs of prisoners. Mock-ups of wooden boxes that held as many as six prisoners each, the swimming pool into which detainees were dunked, and a replica of the tower used as a torture chamber and extermination center are all on display. The Muro de los Nombres lists the names of the 226 people killed or “disappeared” by the military at the villa.

In the late 1990s the Chilean government, once again a democracy, responded to the demands of human rights activists by allowing the villa to be restored and converted into a peace park for quiet reflection on the horrors of authoritarianism. But 15 years after Pinochet's exit from power the campaign for human rights is anything but quiet. The publication of these two books on his regime and other new information emerging from the U.S. and Chile have reignited the debate over Pinochet's role in the abuses, reopened old wounds, and revealed a repressive system far more extensive than anyone had previously estimated.

John Dinges puts the Pinochet regime into an international perspective and signals again the need for atonement for the many versions of Villa Grimaldi that the U.S. quietly ignored during the highly repressive Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s. Dinges argues that the United States had detailed information about terrorist assassination plots on its own soil and elsewhere in the Americas but did nothing to stop them. Instead of saving lives, it preferred to coddle Pinochet and other dictators because they were allies in the fight against world communism. *The Condor Years* is a cautionary tale that urges us to think more carefully about the current battle against terrorism.

Dinges refers to the crusade of Pinochet and other Latin American dictators against revolutionary guerrillas as "the first war on terrorism." In Chile it began on September 11, 1973, with Pinochet's overthrow of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende. As Dinges states, the Chilean and Argentine military leaders who leveled a dirty war against their own people, killing and disappearing thousands, received technical assistance and "strategic leadership" from the U.S. Worse yet, U.S. officials had intimate political and operational relationships with the people involved in the atrocities. Though this revelation is not new, Dinges's careful documentation demonstrates more convincingly than ever that the U.S. government could have intervened to stop right-wing terrorism.

Dinges's book is not an ideological attack on Pinochet but a fair, balanced, painstakingly researched piece of historical journalism. He accepts the conclusion of an official government report that the U.S. "worked to undermine Allende's democratically elected government . . . but had no direct role in the military coup itself." He points to the courageous attempts of some U.S. government officials to warn their superiors about the atrocities of Operation Condor, the dictators' politically most explosive antisubversive organization. He recognizes that the U.S did not have the power to halt the slaughter completely. Dinges also offers a rare and

detailed portrait of the violent left's attempt to unite forces from various countries into a Revolutionary Coordinating Junta, an ambitious but flawed initiative to spread guerrilla warfare throughout the region. The junta served as a major pretext for Condor and for U.S. tolerance of atrocities.

Dinges's main achievement is to deconstruct what has amounted to a 30-year cover-up of U.S. involvement with Chile and Operation Condor. He reconstructs Condor's history by mining previously secret documents from both the U.S. and South America, as well as interview data from more than 200 people, including Colonel Manuel Contreras, head of Chile's brutal spy agency, DINA.

Led by Contreras in Chile and backed by Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, Condor began with the blessing of the U.S. It conducted cross-border kidnappings of alleged subversives and carried out assassination attempts against both the violent and nonviolent opponents of the dictatorships. Condor's activities stretched across South America and into Europe and the U.S. Right-wing Cuban exiles and Italian terrorists joined the organization. DINA and Condor men killed Pinochet opponent General Carlos Prats and his wife, tortured and murdered scores of top guerrilla leaders from several countries, and gunned down Christian Democratic leader Bernardo Leighton in the streets of Rome, leaving him seriously wounded and his wife crippled. Condor also considered murdering U.S. Congressman Edward Koch (later mayor of New York) because of his opposition to U.S. military aid to the Uruguayan dictatorship.

In the most notorious attack, former Allende cabinet member Orlando Letelier and his American assistant, Ronni Moffitt, were killed in a September 1976 car bomb explosion in Washington, D.C.—in Dinges's words, "the most egregious act of foreign-inspired terrorism ever committed in the U.S. capital" prior to 9/11. Condor accounted for only a tiny percentage of the atrocities committed in dictatorial Latin America, but it represented "the final, worst departure from the rules of law and civilized society. States at their highest level of authority entered into an agreement to cooperate in the enterprise of state terrorism."

The Condor nations looked to the U.S. for leadership. Colonel Contreras met with CIA deputy director Vernon Walters in Washington and was put on the agency's payroll. DINA received CIA training and material support. Dinges deftly portrays the contradictory signals on human rights sent by the U.S.—a willful obfuscation that allowed Pinochet and other dictators to continue the repression. In June 1976

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger publicly criticized the Chilean government for its poor human rights record but privately reassured Pinochet that the U.S. understood his fight against communism.

Soon thereafter, the U.S. government received strong evidence that Condor was about to launch violent attacks. Kissinger ordered his ambassadors to warn the Latin Americans against Condor assassination plots, but they did not comply. Kissinger's subordinates feared being criticized for their support of human rights, and they wondered what ulterior motives the CIA, which had its own secret strategy for Latin America, might have in maintaining Condor.

U.S. officals were also concerned about offending Pinochet. In a cable to Kissinger, David Popper, the U.S. ambassador to Chile, stated that Pinochet might "take as an insult any inference that he was connected with such assassination plots." The government, however, had failed to inform Popper about the latest intelligence on Condor. In a few weeks Letelier was dead. Contreras and others later asserted that Pinochet gave the order.

Kissinger's advice to Argentina's dictators to "get the terrorist problem under control as quickly as possible" left them "euphoric," Dinges states. He describes the Kissinger policy on human rights as a "two-track moral message" that the dictators conveniently interpreted as an endorsement of their brutal tactics. This kind of ambiguity must be avoided in the current war on terrorism, Dinges asserts. Condor provides a "template of pitfalls and tragedies" that the U.S. needs to examine as it builds new alliances in the antiterror campaign—including ties to countries that run torture centers.

Appropriately, Dinges's final chapter discusses the U.S. failure to assume responsibility for its involvement with Condor. Condor has taken on added significance in recent years as victims of the dictatorships, their families and foreign governments seek to bring torturers and killers to justice, beginning with Pinochet's 1998 temporary detention in England on a Spanish warrant accusing him of crimes against humanity.

By 2003, hundreds of additional legal actions had been filed against the agents of repression in Europe and South America. Latin American countries ranging from Guatemala to Argentina had established truth commissions to investigate atrocities, discover the whereabouts of disappeared individuals, and ensure that the crimes be

remembered. In Argentina members of the dictatorial junta served jail terms. But in the U.S., Condor has been shrouded by silence, secrecy and deception. The U.S. has in effect granted itself amnesty for the human rights atrocities committed in Latin America, Dinges writes.

Kissinger's two-track morality reflects a flaw in American democracy. While cultivating freedom at home, during most of the 20th century the U.S. tolerated, assisted and instigated dictatorial regimes in Latin America and elsewhere. Americans remain largely oblivious of our government's activities abroad. If more people knew about the history of Condor and other atrocities in Latin America, we might tread more prudently in the world. But neither our leaders nor the press furnish us with a greater awareness of the consequences of our policies.

America, too, needs a truth commission to give the populace a full accounting of our interventions in Latin America and elsewhere. But seeking the truth exacts a price, as Kenneth Maxwell, the Latin America specialist at the Council of Foreign Relations for the past 15 years, recently discovered in a dispute that caused a stir at the highest levels of academia and the policymaking elite.

Maxwell resigned his post after Kissinger allegedly intervened to shut down a debate over Condor and Chile in the pages of the council's publication, *Foreign Affairs*. Maxwell's review of *The Pinochet File*, edited by Peter Kornbluh, had sparked a heated exchange with William Rogers, Kissinger's secretary of state for inter-American affairs from 1974 to 1976 and today the vice chair of Kissinger Associates. Kornbluh, a top researcher at George Washington University's National Security Archive, provides new documentation of the U.S. attempt to destabilize the Allende government. During the debate Maxwell called for a truth commission on U.S. involvement in Chile.

The many new revelations about Chile's dictatorial era came as Pinochet's personal image as an austere and incorruptible man disintegrated in the face of a U.S. Senate report affirming that he had accumulated millions of dollars in hidden wealth. New reports in December showed that the governments of the United States and other countries paid Pinochet millions for unknown services performed.

But the most important developments are taking place not in U.S. halls of power or in the pages of U.S. publications but on the ground in Chile. In October 2003 Chile became the first Latin American nation to establish a *second* truth commission. The

first, the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (also known as the Rettig Commission), investigated the cases of the dead and disappeared, which numbered almost 4,000, and provided compensation for their families. Now the Commission on Torture and Political Prisoners has heard for the first time from the survivors of Pinochet's repression, estimated at some 35,000 people. The commission presented its report to President Ricardo Lagos on November 10. He declared that Chile "should be proud" of the important step the report represents.

After my visit to Villa Grimaldi I interviewed one of the commission's members, Elizabeth Lira, in her office at the Alberto Hurtado University, a Jesuit institution in Santiago. In the 1970s Lira, a psychologist, assisted victims of the repression. She also worked ten years for an ecumenical foundation with the same goal. Like many Chileans under Pinochet, she lost her job, a professorship at Santiago's main Catholic university. President Lagos appointed her to the Commission on Torture and Political Prisoners, which is headed by Sergio Valech, a retired bishop and the last director of the Vicariate of Solidarity, the Catholic Church's human rights agency, founded during the darkest years of the Pinochet era. Over the past year Lira, Valech and six other commission members coordinated a team of 60 people working to amass and catalog as much information as possible about the country's political prisoners. The commission traveled to most of Chile's districts to gather documentation and testimony from former prisoners.

One of the commission's most shocking findings was the discovery of a veritable archipelago of variations on Villa Grimaldi. Human rights organizations assumed that Pinochet's security forces had set up 350 such centers—jails, stadiums, concentration camps and other places separate from the regular police system. The commission's final report listed at least 1,300. One dramatic revelation came during a meeting with former prisoners in a local government building: a man nervously told the commission that the military had held him in that very room and had interrogated people there. Lira says the new number proves the intent and high level of organization behind Pinochet's repressive network.

"The story they tell that it was just a captain or a lieutentant who got angry and wanted to do his job well offends our intelligence. These are things that you cannot improvise. You cannot have 1,300 centers throughout a country like this one if there is no coordination, if there is no financing," Lira notes, adding that to date no one has studied the costs of Pinochet's system. Intelligence-gathering on thousands of people and the movement of prisoners around the country required extensive

resources and personnel, including specialists in repression, many of whom studied at the U.S.-run School of the Americas, she says.

The commission's most important task was to determine the number of political prisoners and to document their cases. These people have received no official recognition. Lira believes the figure could be as high as 50,000, although the exact number will never be known. They ranged from college professors to high school students, from the wealthy to union members. Many of them were tortured or jailed as part of the regime's attempt to use psychological warfare to undermine the followers of Allende and to destroy the numerous grass-roots political organizations that flourished during his rule. The commission did not look into the estimated several hundred thousand other people arrested temporarily in sweeps against mass demonstrations.

Prolonged detention affected people's lives forever, Lira explains. "Some people were ferociously tortured. Others were, let us say, less tortured, but they were always expecting to be treated ferociously," she says, adding that most prisoners lost their jobs, often because employers used their absence from work as a pretext for firing them. Imprisonment especially affected the poor, who could not fall back on a profession, as could doctors and others who went into exile and resumed their work with the help of foreign colleagues.

"In many cases people had to abandon their villages," Lira says. "In the case of the peasants, they were left out of the agrarian reform. They had to leave the countryside and migrate to the cities as poor people. And in many cases the people had to leave the country. So the experience of being in prison is not only the experience of the prison. It is fear, it is torture, it is the impact on the family, it is the loss of work and income, it is the tragedy that affects children when they see the violence used in taking their father away and demolishing him as a person, it is the amazing deterioration of life's possibilities, it is losing one's dreams to become a professional and independent person or becoming someone who could participate more actively in democracy."

The commission did not have prosecutorial powers, but it proposed compensation to former prisoners in the form of what President Lagos has called "austere and symbolic" pensions, in contrast with the $2 million compensation that the Allende family received for his death, Lira says. On November 28 Lagos announced that he would seek congressional approval for $190 monthly pensions. In Lira's view, "A

torture victim should receive at least $1 million, but this is utterly impossible” in a small country such as Chile. Families of the dead and disappeared are receiving about $300 per month—twice the average Chilean pension. But no amount of money can compensate for brutalities for which there is no psychological or physical repair. “The consequences of the illnesses that people have had are so serious as to be infinite,” she says.

Chile will attempt to meet the basic needs of the former prisoners. The majority of those interviewed by the commission are between 60 and 80 years old. They want help mainly to educate their children and grandchildren and for health care “in order to live a dignified old age,” Lira says.

The commission also aims to strengthen democracy in Chile. Chile specialists in the U.S. disagree on the health of Chile’s democratic institutions and on the degree to which the armed forces have receded from power. As Lira points out, the creation of the commission became possible because of Pinochet’s detention in England, the subsequent stripping of his immunity in Chile, and the formal dialogue opened up in Chile between the military and civil society. While a ruling of incompetence allowed Pinochet to avoid prosecution as long as he remained silent, the dialogue led some members of the armed forces to divulge such secrets of the repressive era as the dropping of prisoners into the sea or the clandestine removal of buried bodies. Furthermore, on December 13 a Chilean judge determined that Pinochet is indeed competent and must now stand trial on murder and kidnapping charges stemming from Operation Condor. An appeals court agreed, but Pinochet’s lawyer will take the case to the supreme court. Meanwhile, on December 18 Pinochet was hospitalized after a stroke that his opponents labeled a ploy to escape the charges.

More than anything else, the commission wanted to provide former political prisoners and victims of torture with moral compensation. It has aimed to produce a Chilean version of atonement by making the repression something for which Chilean society as a whole takes responsibility. One of the commission’s biggest challenges has been refuting the commonly held belief that the repression was a communist-inspired myth. Pinochet’s conservative allies have withheld comment on the commission’s controversial work in the hope that people will not notice that work.

Lira is now playing a key role as the commission’s final report is revealed to the nation. She seeks to transmit its findings in a convincing manner. The goal, she says, will not necessarily be to have people read the report, but to become familiar with its basic conclusions and to accept them as part of Chilean history.