



## History Handbook



# The Condor Case

## *The human costs of militarization in Latin America*

By *Arturo Jimenez*

September 21, 2006 marked the 30th anniversary of the first car bomb ever to explode on U.S. soil. It exploded in the streets of Washington, DC killing the former Chilean ambassador to the United Nations, Orlando Letelier, and his U.S. assistant Ronnie Moffitt. The Letelier-Moffitt assassination was one of several international assassinations carried out during the 1970s under Operation Condor.

Operation Condor was a transnational and clandestine, state-sponsored terrorist coalition among the militaries of the Southern Cone of Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay). From the early 1970s through the early 1980s, “subversives”—priests, nuns, politicians, students, and teachers—basically anyone considered a political dissident or a challenge to the military regimes—became possible targets for surveillance, torture, and death (regardless of where in the world those people resided). As Argentine general Jorge Rafael Videla explained in 1976, “A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western or Christian civilization.”

On October 1975 the head of DINA (Directorate of National Intelligence in Chile), Colonel Manuel Contreras, invited several of his counterparts to a secret meeting titled “Primera Reunión InterAmericana de Inteligencia Nacional” in order to “provide a basis for excellent coordination and improved action to benefit the national security of our respective nations.”

The meeting took place the following month and ended with an agreement on November 28 “called CONDOR by the unanimous approval of a motion presented by the Uruguayan delegation in honor of the host country [Chile],” as the minutes of that secret meeting explained.

Operation Condor was to have three phases: the first involved further cooperation among the militaries and intelligence agencies through the sharing of intelligence and the surveillance of specific targeted persons. This first phase also required the creation of a large data bank along with a complex telecommunications system (later known as CONDORTEL) that connected all the Condor states together. The closing statements of that first “Inter-American Meeting of National Intelligence” recommended: “(1) From this day forward, initiate bilateral or multilateral contacts upon the will of the countries participating here, for the exchange of subversive information, opening their own, or new, information files in their respective services; (2) We recommend the creation of a coordinating office, with the purpose of providing information on people and organizations linked to subversion; (5c) We recommend swift and immediate contact when suspicious individuals are either expelled from the country or travel outside the country, so as to alert the intelligence services.”

The second phase promised cross-border operations to kidnap, interrogate (torture), and “disappear” dissidents. The third phase created an international assassination squad that, in practice, seemed to have focused on political/civilian threats (not “terrorist” or “guerrilla”) and that would travel anywhere in the world to eliminate its targets. A 1976 FBI intelligence report explained, “A third and most secret phase of ‘Operation Condor’ involves the formation of special teams from member countries who are to travel anywhere in the world to non-member countries to carry out sanctions up to assassination against terrorists or supporters of terrorist organizations from ‘Operation Condor’ member countries.”

**B**efore Operation Condor came into effect in 1975, every would-be member state was under military rule with the exception of Argentina where the coup came a couple of years later. Operation Condor arguably became the most repressive, far-reaching, and secretive system of the parallel or “shadow” state structures. The military elites of the juntas engineered the Condor system

to secure and extend the dictatorships' control and repression over their societies. As Latin American specialist Patrice McSherry explains, "This parallel apparatus was created to carry out covert or secret policies to avoid legal constraints, and to circumvent any form of accountability." Furthermore, "the Condor death squads were created as an integral part of the broader counterinsurgency or 'counterterror' campaign condoned by elite groups as well as their key foreign ally, the United States."

Since the early 1960s the U.S. Military and CIA have conducted and trained their Latin American counterparts in the use of torture, electric shocks, sensory deprivation, "self-inflicted" pain techniques, the use of "drugs and hypnosis to induce psychological regression," as well as other means of interrogation and assassination. In addition to assisting in the overthrow of democratic governments (Brazil, 1964; Chile, 1973), the CIA helped in the establishment of repressive intelligence agencies across the region that became the coordinating centers in the Condor system. In Paraguay the Technical Department for the Repression of Communism (la Técnica) was originally organized with U.S. support. Similarly, Brazil's National Information Service (SNI)—established after the 1964

coup—enjoyed substantial CIA support and influence. Finally, Chile's infamous Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA) was created with the careful guidance of eight CIA officers. As U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger assured Argentine Foreign Minister Cesar Guzzetti in October 1976: "Look, our basic attitude is that we would like you to succeed. I have an old-fashioned view that friends ought to be supported. What is not understood in the United States is that you have a civil war. We read about human rights problems, but not the context. The quicker you succeed the better."

By that time Kissinger's "friends" had already killed and disappeared thousands of Argentines. In addition, a number of Uruguayans and Chileans had also been disappeared in Argentina (by Condor agents), including some who were registered refugees with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Similarly, Uruguayan Senator Zelmar Michelini and Uruguayan Congressperson Hector Gutierrez Ruiz had also been assassinated in Argentina four months before Kissinger's meeting with Guzzetti. Nonetheless, when meeting Guzzetti, Kissinger had maintained his earlier (March 1976) position when the Argentines understood Kissinger's "encouragement" as having "U.S. approval for its all-out assault on the left in the name of fighting terrorism," the National Security Archive reports. Kissinger's political support extended to Operation Condor. As McSherry explains, "Guzzetti also

told Kissinger that all the Southern Cone militaries were collaborating to pursue 'terrorists'—thus referring to Operation Condor and confirming the embassies perceptions...of regional collusion in repression." Nevertheless, Kissinger gave the Argentine junta a "green light" providing its leaders a sense of "euphoria."

To make matters worse, on August 3, 1976, Kissinger had received a report on Operation Condor titled the "ARA Monthly Report: The 'Third World War' and South America." The report informed Kissinger how the Southern Cone countries had, "established Operation

Condor to find and kill terrorists of the 'Revolutionary Coordinating Committee' in their own countries and in Europe. Brazil is cooperating short of murder operations."

The report also maintained that, "They are joining forces to eradicate 'subversion,' a word which increasingly translated into non-violent dissent from the left and center-left." The report concluded by warning how, "This siege mentality shading into paranoia is perhaps the natural resort of the convulsions of recent years in which the societies of Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina have been badly shaken by assault from the extreme left. But the military leaders, despite near decimation

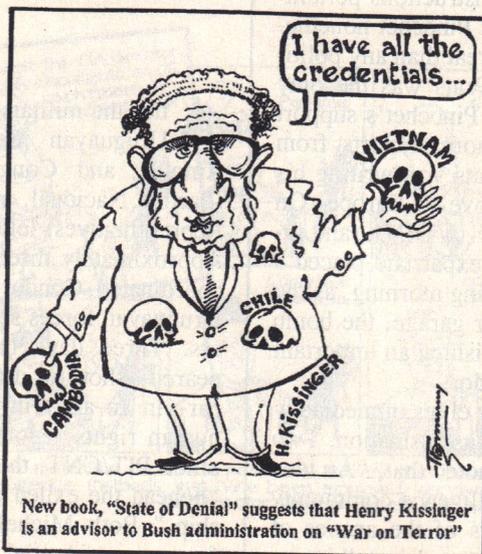
of the Marxist left in Chile and Uruguay, along with accelerated progress toward that goal in Argentina, insist that the threat remains and that war must go on. Some talk of the 'Third World War,' with the countries of the southern cone as the last bastion of Christian civilization."

### Precursors to Operation Condor

Before delving into the "official" Condor years, it is important to note, as Peter Kornbluh argues, that, "Long before Condor's formal creation, its methods of intelligence sharing, surveillance coordination, multilateral repression, and murder were all but perfected."

As early as the 1960s the United States was pushing for more military to military cooperation. As U.S. General Rubert W. Porter emphasized in 1968, "In order to facilitate the coordinated employment of internal security forces within and among Latin American countries we are...endeavoring to foster interservice and regional cooperation by assisting in the organization of integrated command and control centers; the establishment of common operating procedures; and the conduct of joint and combined training exercises."

An excellent example of interservice cooperation, and an important precursor to Operation Condor, was the Chilean-Argentine cooperation in the 1974 assassination



New book, "State of Denial" suggests that Henry Kissinger is an advisor to Bush administration on "War on Terror"

of retired Chilean General Carlos Prats. As early as spring 1974, DINA covertly set up its first external base in Argentina in order to carry out surveillance on Prats and other Chileans from the growing exile community living in Argentina. DINA agent Enrique Arancibia Clavel was assigned the task of setting up the "external branch" and quickly obtained contacts within Argentina's federal police and its secret intelligence, SIDE (Servicio de Inteligencia del Estado). After the September 11, 1973 coup in Chile, General Prats and his wife Sofia went voluntarily into exile in Argentina. Although Prats had "faithfully carried out the restrictive instructions pertaining to his exile," Kornbluh argues that Pinochet nonetheless "considered Prats far more of a threat than any politician or militant guerrilla." General Prats was the only person with the potential to challenge Pinochet's support base: the Chilean military. Furthermore, reports from Argentine intelligence showed that Prats was writing his memoirs and that he had plans to move to Europe. On September 29, 1974, Michael Townley, a DINA (and future Condor) agent and an American expatriate placed a bomb under the Prats' car. The following morning, as the Prats readied themselves to leave their garage, the bomb exploded, killing the couple and establishing an important precursor to the third phase of Plan Condor.

Both Argentine and Chilean military elites immediately felt the implications of General Prats's assassination. Two weeks later, DINA officer Arancibia noted that, "An idea exists to form an anti-communist intelligence community on a continental level, with members of the armies of Uruguay and Argentina who are interested in talking to Chile." Over the next year, bilateral operations (and some multilateral, like the kidnapping, torture, and murders by Chilean, Argentine and Paraguayan forces of members of the organization Junta Coordinadora Revolucionaria in Paraguay) between Chile and Argentina continued. These operations culminated in what Peter Kornbluh calls "one of the Pinochet regime's most Machiavellian and macabre efforts to hide human rights abuses." This became another essential precursor to Condor, codenamed Operation Colombo.

Operation Colombo was a propaganda campaign orchestrated by the Pinochet regime (with Argentine assistance) in order to "quell" the many international human rights accusations towards the Chilean junta. The most infamous part of Operation Colombo was orchestrated in summer 1975 in what is also referred to as the "list of the 119." In order to explain the "disappearance" of 119 MIR (Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionario) and Communist party (PCCH) members, the Pinochet regime planted two separate stories. The first story appeared in a Argentine magazine *LEA* and the second in an obscure Brazilian newsletter *Novo O Dia*. The Argentine magazine reported that 60 Chileans had been killed "by their own comrades in arms as part of a vast and implacable program of vengeance and political purification." The second story explained how an additional 59 Chileans had been killed during "a clash with Argentine security forces." However, such justifications, and the sloppy way in which they were carried out, raised several red flags to

untrusting Chileans (and the world in general). As a result, human rights organizations, the international press, and even the U.S. embassy in Chile eventually agreed that the 119 individuals named in the lists were most likely the victims of a Chilean military conspiracy.

Nevertheless, some essential alliances and important predecessors had now been established and in October 1975 Manuel Contreras managed to get Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia to sign the secret agreement Operation Condor. (Brazil would not officially join the organization for another six months.)

## Uruguay

After the military coup in Uruguay on June 27, 1973, Uruguayan Senator Zelmar Michelini (Frente Amplio) and Congressperson Hector Gutierrez Ruiz (Partido Nacional, and former president of the House of Representatives) left their country for exile in Argentina. Approximately three years later, on May 18, 1976, two coordinated Condor teams composed of Argentine and Uruguayan forces separately kidnapped these exiled leaders. Three days later, on May 21, their bodies appeared—shot to death and stuffed in the trunk of a car—in an alley in Buenos Aires. According to a 1999 human rights report conducted by the Uruguayan labor union PIT/CNT, the purpose of the assassinations was to "behead the exiled resistance to the Uruguayan dictatorship." Both Michelini and Gutierrez Ruiz, along with former presidential candidate Wilson Ferreira Aldunate (who had also been targeted for assassination, but managed to elude capture by seeking refuge in the Austrian embassy), had been involved in an elaborate plan to move Uruguay towards democratic elections.

Furthermore, as John Dinges explains, "Ferreira and Michelini also had been exchanging letters and phone calls with members of the U.S. Congress to arrange a visit to Washington to testify about conditions in Uruguay." In other words, Michelini and Gutierrez Ruiz represented a political threat to the military regime in Uruguay. As a result, a Condor team kidnapped, tortured, and murdered the two Uruguayan leaders. In addition, in a final attempt to discredit the legitimacy of the two respected politicians, their bullet-ridden bodies were left alongside the cadavers of two well known Tupamaro guerrillas, Rosario Barredo and William Withelaw Blanco (although by that time most of the Tupamaros had abandoned violent means and had moved to establishing political ties with exiled leaders).

For Uruguayan exiles the peak of state-sponsored transnational terrorism took place between 1976-1977. In addition to the assassinations of Michelini, Gutierrez Ruiz, Barredo, and Withelaw, between April 19 and May 21 1976, a series of additional kidnappings and assassinations of Uruguayan exiles (living in either Buenos Aires or the Rio de la Plata region) occurred, terrorizing the Uruguayan population. The first was that of Telba Juarez, an Uruguayan school teacher who was found shot to death in a barrio in Buenos Aires (she was kidnapped along

with Eduardo Chizzola who is still “missing”). Shortly thereafter, civilians strolling the beaches found 10 mutilated bodies off the shores of Uruguayan or Argentine waters (the bodies are believed to be those of kidnapped Uruguayans exiled in Argentina). These and many other bodies that were found represent a minority of the Uruguayan victims under Operation Condor. The majority, as McSherry explains, remain “missing,” including at least 132 Uruguayans that were “disappeared” through the Condor years (127 in Argentina, 3 in Chile, and 2 in Paraguay). Moreover, the PIT/CNT maintain that Condor agents also kidnapped eight children (five of whom have been recovered by their families). An additional five children were born while their mothers were imprisoned in secret Argentine torture chambers, like the notorious Orletti Motors (two of these babies have been recovered).

What this shows is a series of coordinated operations between Argentine and Uruguayan forces intended to terrorize anyone opposed to the dictatorship. John Dinges explains the extent of Uruguay’s involvement in Operation Condor: “Uruguay’s SID [Servicio de Inteligencia de Defensa], the newly consolidated defense intelligence service, began operating inside Argentina around the time of the coup. The Uruguayan operations in Argentina resulted in the largest group of disappearances carried out by Operation Condor. Indeed, more Uruguayans disappeared and were assassinated in Argentina...than in Uruguay itself as a result of security police operations.”

While Uruguay was one of the most involved members of the Condor system, it faced a relatively small militant threat, though it should be noted that recent Uruguayan history had made the middle class and military quite frightened (as a result of Tupamaro operations and revolutionary rhetoric). By 1975 the Tupamaros had been crushed by the military and those who survived were extremely divided and “had all but ceased guerrilla activity.” The only “terrorist” threat came from a small anarcho-syndicalist group called the Partido por la Victoria (PVP) which had a militant branch known as OPR-33. Condor agents kidnapped all the PVP members they found and sent them to Orletti Motors in Argentina for severe torture sessions. Condor operatives also killed the majority of PVP members, including their leaders, Leon Duarte and Gerardo Gatti, who “disappeared” in 1976. However, a “fortunate” group of 22 PVP men and women were separated by Condor agents at Orletti Motors (after being tortured) to be used for a propaganda campaign. On October 20, 1976, a Condor team took the

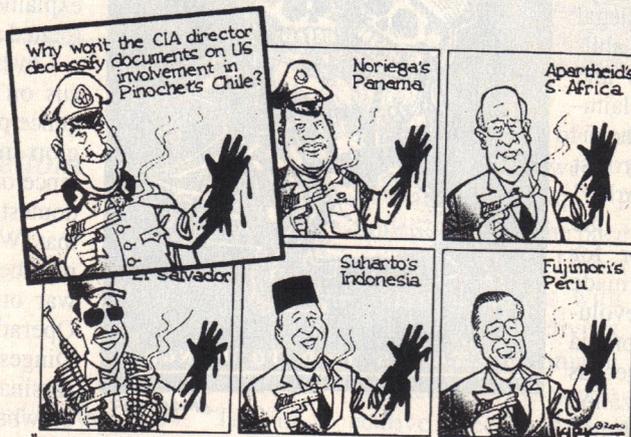
22 prisoners to a hotel only to be “captured” by Uruguayan armed forces a couple of hours later. Soon after, the Uruguayan military held a press conference where they claimed that the 22 captured were militants from the terrorist organization OPR-33 that had been planning a military offensive against Uruguayan targets. In addition, the Uruguayan military seized the opportunity to “explain” the disappearances of an additional 60 Uruguayans in Argentina.

The irony of the insignificantly small PVP is that, while they were never able to exert any real “threat,” the fact that they existed provided a useful pretext for further repression by the Uruguayan military. The more serious threat to the survival and legitimacy of the Uruguayan dictatorship was that of political dissidents like Michellini, Gutierrez Ruiz, and Ferreira. After a joint task force of Uruguayans, Chileans, and Argentines raided the offices of a church that contained the records of registered refugees with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the vast majority of people the Condor agents went after had renounced or

never promoted violence (not to suggest that if they had not renounced violence such a fate would be warranted).

Impunity continues to protect those responsible for the atrocities committed during those 12 years of military rule. In 1989 a plebiscite in Uruguay reaffirmed some earlier amnesty laws (the 1984 Naval Pact and 1986 Ley de Caducidad) that decided to forgo prosecution without conviction of crimes committed before March 1985. (However, the 1989 plebiscite passed by a slim majority with threats from the military that a price would be paid if it did not pass.) No Uruguayan court has been able to establish a trial dealing with the crimes of Operation Condor like the hearings of Baltazar Garzón in Spain, Rodolfo Canicoba Corral in Argentina, or Juan Guzman in Chile.

In the current “war on drugs,” “terrorism,” “subversion,” or “narcoterrorism,” the United States continues to militarize the Andean region and Latin America as a whole. In 1998 U.S. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen argued in the Defense Ministerial III in Bogotá, Colombia that, in his opinion, “In order to interdict the terrorist before they set off their weapons, you have to have that king of intelligence-gathering capability, but it runs smack into Constitutional protection of privacy. And it’s a tension which will continue to exist in every free society—the reconciliation of the need for liberty and the need for law and order.... Because once the bombs go off—this is a personal view, this is not a governmental view of the United States, but it’s my personal view—that once these



“These materials present a pattern of activity that (reveals) intelligence methods that have been employed worldwide.”  
CIA Director George Tenet, Aug. 11, 2000

weapons start to be exploded, people will say protect us. We're willing to give up some of our liberties and some of our freedoms, but you must protect us."

Challenging constitutional protections in a region whose antecedents in fighting "terrorism" include Operation Condor can have detrimental results, to say the least. The U.S. government has continued (successfully) to blur the line between drug-trafficking and terrorism for many years. In 2001 the majority leader of the House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, argued that "by cracking down on the illegal drug trade we weaken terrorists' ability to strike the United States and other democracies." He later claimed, "The illegal drug trade is the financial engine fueling many terrorist organizations around the world." Similarly, Francis X. Taylor, the State Department's coordinator for the Office of Anti-Terrorism made the claim that, "Today, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are the most dangerous international terrorist organization based in the hemisphere...[n]ow more than ever it is time to build coalitions against terrorism which are founded on pro-active diplomacy, strict application of the law, financial controls, intelligence sharing and a fierce resolve to achieve justice."

Washington had long been trying to find a way to combat the guerrilla movements (mainly FARC and ELN) in the region. After the September 11 attacks, in August 2002, with the cover of "new" threats and under the name of "cooperative security," the U.S. Congress authorized the use of lethal assistance for counterterrorism along with counterdrug measures. (Prior to August 2002, the funds from Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative could only be used to combat the drug trade. Covert policies tell a different story, however.)

Illustrating this "new" concept of "cooperative security," in November 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explained, "Next May, the Organization of American States will meet to review the hemisphere's security architecture. Our objective should be to strengthen those institutions and develop new areas for concrete operation. I hope that this week's conference will consider two such initiatives. First is an initiative to foster regional naval cooperation. The objective would be to strengthen the operational and planning capabilities of partner nations, upgrade national command and control systems, and improve regional information-sharing. This could potentially include cooperation among coast guards, customs, and police forces. I suggest we consider a round-table as a good way to consider and pursue this initiative. Second is an initiative to improve the hemisphere's peace keeping capabilities. Many of you are already leaders in this field—you are sending skilled and experienced forces

with specialized capabilities to global hot spots. We should explore the possibility of integrating these various specialized capabilities into larger regional capabilities—so that we can participate as a region in peacekeeping and stability operations."

Latin American specialist Brian Loveman argues that military leaders around Latin America "also saw opportunities in the melding of antiterrorism and the drug war." As Loveman explains, a month after Rumsfeld's speech, the commander of the Argentine army explained how, "defense must be treated as an integral matter."

Loveman concludes that, "The focus on counterterrorism and intelligence pushed the militaries of the region increasingly back into surveillance of civilians and participation in domestic politics..." It is a shame that Washington officials don't remember the blowback from the first war on terrorism 30 years ago. As Operation Condor specialist John Dinges explains, "The Letelier assassination in Washington, DC was blowback. It was orchestrated by a close ally, a dictator the United

States helped install, maintain, and defend in power; it was planned by an intelligence official [Manuel Contreras] who had been on the CIA payroll and who traveled frequently for consultation with CIA officials in Washington; it was carried out by DINA, a newly created security organization whose personnel were trained in Chile by a CIA team; it was detected in its initial operational stages not by alert spycraft, but by the very chumminess of CIA officials with those planning the crimes."

This time around the potential "blowback," suffering, and devastation are clear. According to the U.S. government there are identified terrorist threats in virtually every country in Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela all supposedly contain some type of Middle Eastern "terrorist cells" within their country. In addition since the United States also sees "narcoterrorism" and illegal immigration as national security threats, the U.S. also incriminates Bolivia, Costa Rica, Cuba (the U.S. also considers Cuba a "state-sponsored" terrorist nation), the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru. If the United States continues to push its hegemonic, aggressive, and militaristic policies, and if the Latin American militaries agree with the U.S. and decide to once again eliminate "internal terrorist threats," we might once again witness the flight of the Condor throughout Latin America. **Z**



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