

A Patchwork of History: Chile, Pinochet, and the United States

By Melanie Harster

America's Backyard

Historical narratives have painted the United States as a beacon of liberty, a land of freedom, and a crusader against global terrorism. Yet, these sweeping characterizations of righteous power overlook both centuries of slavery and colonialism as well as more recent interventions. In the late twentieth century, United States proxy wars and covert operations became the seedy underbelly of America's pursuit of liberal democracy worldwide. The obfuscation of US involvement has skewed narratives in their favor, denying the cultural and sociopolitical repercussions of US involvement in countries where it has intervened.

The United States has long asserted its dominance within Latin America through policies and an active presence in the region. As early as 1823, the Monroe Doctrine pronounced that "the American continents... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."¹ One of the tenets of American foreign policy at the time was to preserve the Americas as its sphere of influence, be it against European monarchism, fascism, or communism during the Cold War. Against these perceived threats, it developed an extensive military apparatus and sought to intervene militarily and would do so in the decades to come.

In Chile, American intervention was debilitating. Most notably in the installation of General Augusto Pinochet's government. Not only did the nation suffer in terms of lost lives and the false promise of liberal democracy, but it was also impacted in a less measurable but perhaps more consequential way: American intervention has under-

mined the preservation of Chilean history. It was not until 1999 — twenty-six years after the coup — declassified documents on American covert activities in Chile were made public knowledge. Chile's people have retaliated against Western intervention and the attempts of their installed government to rewrite history. A day that would prove immeasurably consequential for millions of Chileans was, for Americans, nothing more than an experiment to wipe their hands clean of before returning to 'more pertinent' affairs.

The "School of Assassins"

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, along with critical help from the United States, launched a coup against the government, led at the time by Salvador Allende. This ushered in nearly two decades of a repressive military regime under General Augusto Pinochet.²



Illustration by Savannah Flores

Chileans shared similar left-leaning aspirations of economic stability, land reform, improved wages, health care, education, and a right to self-determination to those in Guatemala, Colombia, El Salvador, and elsewhere in Latin America. Just as these desires were not unique to Chile, neither was their suppression. Allende was regarded as the first freely elected Marxist head of government seeking to turn Chile

down the "road to socialism."³ However, a socialist government and progressive reforms undermined US economic interests in the region and heightened fears about other countries in Latin America moving towards communism.

To intervene in other countries on behalf of itself and its

allies, the United States built up a robust and repressive military apparatus whose operations were conducted in secret and only exposed once the harm had been done. The full extent of the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), White House, and the United States Department of State, was kept under lock and key.

Most illustrative of this fact is the development of the School of the Americas (SOA), also known as *la escuela de golpes*: the school of coups.⁴ The School of the Americas was a US Army Center for Latin American militaries, originally established in 1946 in the US-controlled Panama Canal Zone.⁵ Those sent to train there were taught counterinsurgency techniques, intelligence and counterintelligence training, and psychological warfare. The most prestigious of all trainees went to Fort Leavenworth, where many of the graduating officers would play instrumental roles in orchestrating and organizing the overthrow of democratically elected governments.⁶ Many Chilean officers who assisted Pinochet were trained at a US military service school, an overwhelming number were alumni of the School of the Americas. General Augusto Pinochet and his compatriots would not have found success without the US at their side.

Over 60,000 Latin American soldiers received training from this institution. Some of the alumni include infamous human rights abusers including Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson. 11 Latin American dictators attended the school, including Argentine *junta* leader, Leopoldo Galtieri, under whose rule tens of thousands of dissidents “disappeared.” Guatemala's Efraín Ríos Montt, another graduate, was responsible for the scorched earth campaign against indigenous villages, classified as genocide by the UN.⁷ The operations of the School of the Americas have been largely shrouded in secrecy. Declassified documents were not released until the Chile Documentation Project detailed the human rights abuses, terrorism, and political violence during Pinochet's 17-year reign.⁸ Despite calls for its closure and a temporary cease of its operations in 2000, it was reopened as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) and remains in operation today.

Left Behind

The soldiers trained by the United States helped to orchestrate the most infamous legacy of Pinochet's regime — the *desaparecidos*. The *desaparecidos* were the thousands of people who “disappeared” — secretly imprisoned or murdered — under Chilean security forces. Family members of the *desaparecidos* issued habeas corpus appeals, demanding to know the fates of their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers only to be denied. Yet, no avenues to redress the injustice inflicted upon them and their loved ones and seek accountability were made available: the only answer from the Chilean government was that the missing were

leftist militants that had fled the country.⁹ In reality, many of them had been kidnapped and killed. Chileans were denied the right to grieve their loved ones, to remember their memories, and left without even a body to bury.

In an effort to communicate the reality of living in economic insecurity, government repression, and authoritarian rule, the *Arpillera* Movement was born, named after narrative quilt squares sewn by Chilean women. The women stitching these quilts together came to be known collectively as *arpilleristas*.¹⁰ These women were largely working-class and the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of those “disappeared” by the Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA), Chile's secret police agency.¹¹ They created *arpilleras* to commemorate the *desaparecidos*, their family members who disappeared under the Pinochet regime. In doing so, they protested the injustices of the regime. The *arpilleras* allowed women who had been victimized to write their own stories and depict the difficulties of living under martial law, as well as the uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones. The *arpilleristas* stitched into their tapestries accounts of the truth and the realities that Pinochet sought to discount.

Remembrance as Revolution

Dictatorships are notorious for their efforts to control history. Pinochet's Chile was no different. Pinochet's efforts, along with the United States' withholding of key documents and intelligence, have caused a generation of young Chileans to grow up with little to no knowledge of the facts surrounding the military coup of 1973. Chilean history remains a point of contention today. The erasure and alteration of history by Pinochet and the United States have obscured the truth of decades of Chilean history. A conflict brought on by western intervention: there would have been no Pinochet and no dictatorship without the United States.

The story of US intervention is one that remains unfinished. Regardless of who is declared the winner of a conflict, whoever controls the narrative wins it in memory. It is imperative for those who have been victimized to tell their own narratives. Chilean women sewed the portraits of their loved ones in fabric, making the mere act of remembrance a revolutionary act. But, the story does not end with them.

In 2010, *El Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos*, The Museum of Memory and Human Rights was opened in Santiago. It is dedicated to commemorating the victims of human rights violations during the military dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet.¹² The museum is a physical structure dedicated to the preservation of historical memory, and the full scope of America's intervention is marked in the museum's archives and exhibitions. Through museums, tapestries, and sociopolitical change, many Chileans have begun reclaiming their history.