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# The Morality of History — General Augusto Pinochet

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Events of recent days underscore the moral dimension of history. The death at age 91 of General Augusto Pinochet, the former dictator of Chile, came as he was under indictment for human rights abuses and tax evasion.

The Chilean strongman had seized power in 1973, toppling the government of President Salvador Allende. Pinochet, as Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean armed forces, seized power with the covert assistance of the United States government. He then proclaimed himself president and ruled as a virtual dictator.

There is little doubt that Pinochet's regime was murderous and evil. The American purpose in arranging the coup against Salvador Allende was tied to concerns that communism would quickly sweep across the southern hemisphere. The context was the Cold War and covert operations by both superpowers were common.

The Pinochet government is generally credited with stemming the communist tide and many Chileans remember the Pinochet years as an era of prosperity — especially when compared to other nations in the region. Allende was a Stalinist who wanted to bring Chile into the Soviet orbit. But the Pinochet regime stayed in power through the brutal oppression of its own people. Thousands were murdered and more thousands simply disappeared.

Pinochet cheated justice repeatedly, even as he fled to London to escape justice. He was eventually charged with crimes against humanity in a Spanish court, but he was ruled too old and too sick to stand trial. Meanwhile, in Chile, Pinochet was lauded as a leader who brought prosperity, peace, and eventual democracy to the nation, even as others decried him as a murderer.

General Augusto Jose Ramon Pinochet Ugarte may have cheated justice on earth, but he will face the unerring bar of judgment before God. Once again, as in the case of Slobodan Milosevic, a mass murderer beats the rap — but only on earth. The rule of law demands that a government be held responsible by the people for its actions.

What is the historical judgment on Pinochet, the Cold War, and American involvement? Pinochet was a murderer, but all parties concerned have a great deal to answer for. Nevertheless, the context of the Cold War is much like the context of colonialism and its end. We just do not know what would have happened otherwise. Would the southern hemisphere have gone communist? Would the alternative to the Pinochet regime have been even worse? Was a better outcome possible?



History defies simplistic explanations and judgments. As historian Paul Johnson has observed, “The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.”

Nevertheless, the morality of history is a question we can never abandon. The writing and retelling of history is itself a moral activity. There is no way around it.

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