

## Rethinking Pinochet: In Praise of Strength

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Almost nobody is more reviled by the international intelligentsia and media than the late Augusto Pinochet, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chilean dictator. He holds a prominent position in the political left's "rogues' gallery" comprised of those who stood in opposition to their goals.

His supposed "crimes" included conducting a military coup to illegitimately grab control of the Chilean government from a popularly elected president, rounding up and torturing huge numbers of innocent citizens (killing as many as 80,000 in the process) and corruptly stealing vast sums of money while ruling as a dictator.

But many of those claims are either false or exaggerated -- most credible estimates of those killed are below 5,000 -- or they must be viewed in context. More important, if we raise the examination of Pinochet from the bitter soil of leftist *ressentiment* to the question of human flourishing, he appears as one of recent history's shining lights.

Context can be crucial when judging a historical event, and that is certainly true of the Chilean coup of 1973. Chile at that time had a complex political environment, with six major parties and many other splinters and factions inside and outside the major parties, according to the late Princeton political scientist and Latin America expert Paul Sigmund. Two of the six were generally conservative; they united into one "National" party in the late 1960s. Two "centrist" parties were actually socialist but favored incremental movement toward a collective society rather than revolution.

On the left were two Marxist parties, the Communists and Socialists. The Socialists, despite their less extreme name, were at least as radical as the Communists. Both parties had some members who favored working within the existing constitutional framework and some who wanted violent revolution. Salvador Allende, the president who was deposed by the military junta that elevated Pinochet to power, was a founder of the Socialist party who favored transformation largely through constitutional means.

Preceding Allende as president was Eduardo Frei, a member of the centrist Christian Democratic Party. The theme of his administration was "A Revolution in Liberty," which was to be a gradual but "fundamental transformation of Chilean political and economic structures." During his term of office, from 1964 to 1970, Frei began nationalizing the all-important copper industry and redistributing land. He taxed the rich, initiated price controls, relaxed literacy requirements for

voting, and expanded public housing. His platform was, in fact, very similar to the policies of his Marxist successor Allende; Frei's moderation laid the groundwork for Allende's excesses.

Frei was personally popular with voters, but Chilean presidents were limited to one six-year term. His party was blamed for high inflation (roughly 40 percent per year) that was hurting the economy, and Allende was elected with a narrow plurality of 36.2 percent of the vote in 1970. Still, Allende perceived his election as a mandate to further socialism. He aggressively nationalized industry and encouraged forced expropriation of both farms and factories by peasants and workers. Sigmund described how Allende deliberately used a combination of price controls and minimum wages to drive businesses into bankruptcy and then tried to expropriate them for "underperforming."

The government took over food distribution; it also started to overhaul primary and secondary schools -- both public and private -- to "create a new socialist society" with "social justice" its aim, Sigmund wrote. Money flowed -- \$343 million in foreign reserves left by Frei were rapidly depleted, the money supply was expanded, and Chile borrowed extensively overseas even though it failed to repay international loans.

The results of such policies were predictable. There was a burst of prosperity in the first year -- and then chaos ensued. The expropriated farms did not produce much food, as they replaced large operations growing commercial crops with small-scale subsistence farming. Chile had to import food, borrowing huge sums of money to do so. Investment in future industrial production slowed to a crawl. Inflation hit 353 percent in 1973 (and continued to rise to 505 percent in 1974).

The Allende years featured considerable political violence, with roughly 35 political assassinations occurring in two-and-a-half years. Allende "pardoned" Marxist radicals "who had been imprisoned for terrorism and bank robberies," according to Sigmund. There was government suppression of radio stations and other media. Strikes by private truckers -- fearful of plans to start a government-owned trucking company -- paralyzed distribution networks. The entire country seemed to be stockpiling weapons; shipments of arms from Cuba were discovered -- it was later revealed that the Allende administration aided the training of left-wing militias.

Chile appeared to be hurtling toward a bitter, emotionally charged civil war. So, in September of 1973, to prevent a violent upheaval with the potential to kill hundreds of thousands of Chileans, the military stepped in.

The coup was not the act of an individual power-mad opportunist, as Pinochet is sometimes depicted. The heads of all three branches of the military, plus the *caribineros* (national police), participated in the takeover. The junta had shown considerable restraint, holding back for roughly a year in the hope that a constitutional solution could be found. Pinochet, as head of the most powerful branch, the army, emerged as the ultimate authority.

Among the junta's initial acts was the elimination of Marxist political parties. To restore the market economy, they relied on the advice of a group of economists from Catholic University in

Santiago who had studied at the University of Chicago where free market guru Milton Friedman dominated the economics department.

Even so, the economy did not immediately spring back. It took several years to get inflation down to its historical (but still very high) levels. Income also did not rise immediately, since Pinochet had to institute austerity measures first. Allende had created artificially low unemployment rates through government featherbedding; among other measures, the junta had to eliminate many unnecessary government jobs to allow market forces to operate.

But eventually, in the mid-1980s, the Chilean economy took off. Today, Chile is the most prosperous country in Latin America, with a per capita income of \$15,111 in 2018 (it was only fifth-best in 1970). Inflation for 2018 was a paltry 2.56 percent. Chile ranks 15<sup>th</sup> worldwide in the Heritage Foundation's 2020 "Index of Economic Freedom"; the next closest country in Latin America is Colombia in 45<sup>th</sup> place. It also ranked first in Latin America in the Cato Institute's "Human Freedom Index," last published in 2017. And it is just edged out by Costa Rica for having Latin America's longest life span: 79.57 years to 79.52 years.

Those statistics -- not the numbers but the human flourishing they represent -- are Pinochet's real legacy. Would most Venezuelans today -- who live in a failing totalitarian state with a popularly elected Marxist government -- prefer that a military junta had wrested control from Hugo Chavez and eliminated a few thousand of the most hardcore Marxists? They would likely jump at the opportunity. Pinochet took over an equally nightmarish state that was racing toward either bloody civil war or totalitarian communism (or both), made hard decisions to correct the problems, nurtured the government for 17 years, and voluntarily relinquished power in 1990 when the nation's practices and institutions were strengthened so that it could flourish democratically.

For that, the international left has damned him for all time.

The Chilean coup of 1973 offers hard lessons that many will not accept because these lessons do not appeal to superficial norms of fairness and tolerance. For one, electoral politics do not always equate to human flourishing but can instead bring repression. For another, a nation must deal harshly with those who would deny liberty to the rest.