

REFLECTIONS ON CHILE'S OWN 9/11

The brick-walled, steel-gated compound called Villa Grimaldi in a quiet suburb of Santiago, Chile, summoned for me memories of my long ago pilgrimages to Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz. Grimaldi was where many of dictator Augusto Pinochet's victims were brought to be tortured. On the April afternoon I came to bear witness to those who suffered and died at that place no one else was present.

My sole purpose in visiting Santiago was to explore, from that other side, the connections between Chilean and U.S. history. Naturally, one of my first calls was at the museum of national history. It is an extensive and rich collection of artifacts from the Spanish colonial period, the wars of independence and conflicts with neighboring Peru and Bolivia, but I was stunned to find the history exhibited ends on September 11, 1973. That was the day when Pinochet's troops surrounded and shelled La Moneda, the national palace. Inside, the democratically elected president Salvador Allende was found dead.

The world's major newspapers displayed on museum walls - La Monde of Paris, Madrid's El Pais, The Times of London, and others - report Allende's death "an apparent suicide," with this caveat. They took the word of the soldiers who invaded the smoldering palace. Press was not allowed access to the scene of his death.

Returning to sunlit Plaza de Armas, I tried to get my head around a question: what if Americans ignored the last 36-year period of our own history - all that has happened since 1973, including the drama of Watergate and Nixon's ignoble resignation? What, I had to ask myself, has happened to memory in Chile?

A simple explanation would be that curators haven't gotten around to recent history, or they lack the space. A book depicting Pinochet as a beneficent leader abused in his latter years displayed in a nearby store bluntly suggests that not all have turned that page of Chilean history. When I sought directions to Villa Grimaldi, most respondents had little idea where it is.

Many Chileans, pleased with a flourishing economy, simply want to "move on." That's Obama's phrase too, and it raises high the mirror on this question of torture - Pinochet's and our own recent practices. In each case, those terribly abused were considered "enemies of the state," a most interesting comparison to weigh.

There are other ironies in bringing the days of Nixon, and his secretary of state Henry Kissinger, into this reflection. Like the Cheney-Bush villains and their deeds in conduct of their so-called "war on terror," the Nixon crowd bloodied their hands by bringing Pinochet to power. Allende was a democratic socialist, considered by Nixon and his corporate cronies unsuitable to govern a country so rich in minerals as Chile. At Nixon's direction, the CIA engineered the murder of two Chilean generals loyal to Allende and therefore likely to block a coup. There was also the assassination of an Allende diplomat at Dupont Circle in Washington. U.S. connivance in this coup helped bring on a 17-year reign of terror in which 3,200 Chileans died, 80,000 were incarcerated without trial and 30,000 tortured at some 800 sites.

Pinochet subsequently conspired with military cliques who controlled the governments of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru in a coordinated effort to police the peoples of South America and suppress any liberal, progressive or socialist thought in the region. Called Operation Condor, it claimed an

estimated 60,000 victims - many tortured, some simply loaded into planes and pushed out over the ocean. The U.S. government was a player in the dealings of Operation Condor.

The elevation to presidencies of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, along with reformers elsewhere in the region, are Latin American people's appropriate response to decades (indeed centuries) of misrule. Corrupt elites are being swept aside in confirmation of Fidel Castro's mantra, "We will win because history is with us."

Filming at the 2006 World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela, I interviewed a Chilean woman who bore personal witness to what Santiago was like in Pinochet's time. I will call her Camilla. This is what she had to say.

In the days following the September 11 coup people began seeing bodies in vacant lots, on the streets, floating in the river. When those who gathered pointed them out to others, the soldiers and police asked, "What are you looking at?" They menacingly insisted, "You aren't seeing anything." Her father was arrested and tormented by the authorities. The family had to gather and destroy their music and books, such as poetry by Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda. The poet had supported Allende.

"I was fifteen when Allende was murdered," Camilla said. "That day I went out, lowered our Chilean flag to half staff and placed a black ribbon on it. When my father saw what I had done he demanded I take it down. I said I wouldn't and he struck me. Now I know he was trying to protect us. After his release we emigrated from the country."

Dictators and entrenched ruling elites alike invariably enrich a powerful minority in a given country, a group that in turn joins in governing how the history of their times is written and taught to children. We have examples from Japanese denials about World War II, from Israel about victimization of Palestinians, and here in the U.S. a still unacknowledged, apologies and reparations made for abuse and genocide of Native Americans.

So egregious were the crimes "legitimized" and/or fomented by the radical nature of what Bush once labeled his "crusade" - we've recently learned these include American soldiers raping Iraqi prisoners - that there can be no movement forward until these crimes are fully and openly addressed, by the president, Congress, and in the courts.