

## Dinges takes the U.S. to task in Latin America's war on terrorism

By Divya Gupta  
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9/11 has marked a turning point in history more than once. Like in 2001, back then too, it was followed by a war on terrorism.

The 1970s are considered to be one of the darker periods in Latin American history. In "The Condor Years," author, John Dinges goes through painstaking investigative rigor to reveal how right-wing military governments in Latin America used the ideological front of a war on terrorism to unleash their own apparatus of terror known as "Operation Condor."

In theory and rhetoric, the sinister mechanism was targeted at the revolutionary left and extremist communists. In practice, as the author's research revealed, it was used to purge the continent, and beyond, of all possible opposition and dissent to the military regimes.

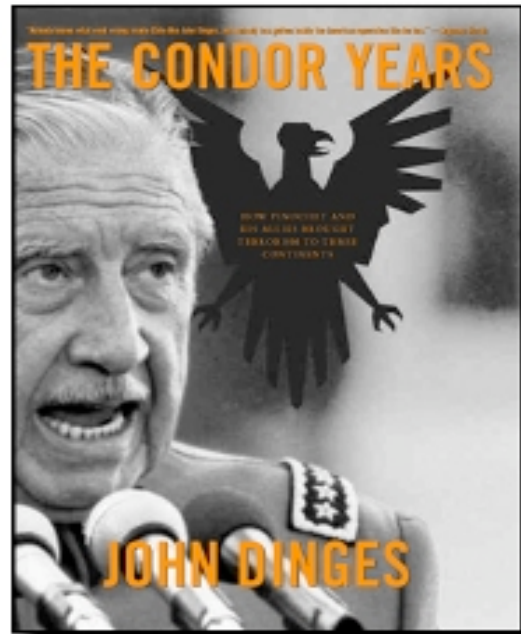
The account starts with a dictator's unforgiving rise to power in Chile when Augusto Pinochet led a coup d'état Against the popular socialist president, Salvador Allende. The coup took place on Sept. 11, 1973. Allende preferred to take his own life rather than surrender to Pinochet.

The author provides a detailed and unsurpassed account of how the coup ushered in an era of state sponsored human rights crimes that were carried out "at the highest levels of state policy, under the direct control and manipulation of the heads of state and ministers of government."

Dinges, who lived in Chile from 1972 to 1978, relied on a variety of sources to reveal the inner structure and intricate functioning of Operation Condor which broadly had three phases: information and intelligence gathering; the torture, kidnapping and killing of opponents in Latin America and finally the assassinations of high- ranking leftist and democratic politicians living in exile in Europe and the US.

Impressively, the author managed to interview over 200 people who directly participated in the events of the period. The most noteworthy source among these was General Juan Manuel Contreras, the head of the Directorate of National Intelligence, a secret military wing created soon after Pinochet came to power to provide an institutional base to "Operation Condor."

The author accessed an estimated 30,000 pages of declassified government documents released by the Clinton administration and approximately 350,000 pages of documents discovered in



The Condor years: How Pinochet and his allies brought terrorism to three continents by John Dinges.

**Photo:** Cover photograph by Bettman/Corbis and Cover Design by HONEST

Paraguay in 1992 which press reports at the time called "The Archive of Terror." The author also acquired an additional 2,000 pages of documents through Freedom of Information Act requests.

In addition to Chile, which played a central role both in the creation and operational success of the "Operation Condor," the author's research sheds greater light than ever before on how the apparatus benefited from unprecedented cooperation between its five other members - right-wing military governments in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil. They were all brought together in their common fear and dislike of left leaning movements.

The author's access to several hundred pages of secret correspondence between Chile's intelligence agency carrying out the Condor operations and its undercover operative in Argentina is one clear example of evidence used to reveal the level of inter-country collaboration under Condor.

The most important discovery of the investigation, as the author himself submits in the latter half of the book, is "how the U.S. government officials learned of Condor's phase three assassination plans and how they reacted." After careful study of the evidence from sources mentioned earlier, Dinges arrives at some damning conclusions on this front.

The most important among them is that the CIA and US State Department officials and then secretary of state, Henry A. Kissinger, had intelligence of a two-member assassin team heading from Paraguay for Washington D.C. and that they could have prevented the assassination of Orlando Letelier, former Chilean foreign minister.

Midway through the book the author cites excerpts from the Hinchey Report, which suggested that Contreras was on the secret payroll of the CIA.

"By April 1975, intelligence reporting showed that Contreras was the principle obstacle to a reasonable human rights policy within the junta, but an interagency committee directed the CIA to continue its relationship with Contreras," according to the report.

The author also reproduces excerpts from internal CIA communication and memos (heavily redacted in some cases), the Hinchey Report, other declassified documents and interviews with Contreras and other military officers, CIA and U.S. State Department officials to assert and conclude that the U.S. had knowledge of the Condor operations from its inception.

Furthermore, the same evidence points to the U.S. having provided training to officials from Chile's intelligence agency provided equipment like computers and advanced communication equipment and were even planning to post CIA operatives in Chile as part of Condor.

These and other similar examples provided in the book clearly point to the fact that the "in those dark years, the ideological battle the U.S. was fighting against Communism ultimately trumped any desire to spread democracy," as the author eloquently put it.

The author's research and findings also had some very critical lessons for today's geo-strategic context and in particular U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Unfortunately, for all of the book's strengths those lessons are not articulated clearly or comprehensively, which is anti-climactic.

Unresolved crimes of the past do not remain in the past, was the insightful remark offered by the author in the final chapter of the book. Equally the benefit of such an exercise, particularly if the

evidence allows for it, is to explain how to avoid the mistakes of the past, from being repeated in the future.

In a post-9/11 environment and with the ongoing war in Iraq, now more than ever before, it was incumbent on the author to cull out these lessons more emphatically from his investigative research and findings.

That said, the author should be commended for having highlighted an often glossed over aspect of the history of the period - the revolutionary left's own excesses through kidnappings for ransom and the torture of businessmen and military personnel.

Dinges also demonstrated an unflinching commitment to backing every claim in his book with evidence. This was matched by a formidable command of language and matter-of-fact stylistic tone befitting of a non-narrative fictional account dealing with a serious subject. The author managed to keep the pace moving and the reader's interest hooked, for the most part, as the book unraveled like a spy novel.

With the number of names, dates and moving parts, the book would have benefited from a time line highlighting major events and milestones and maps as illustrations and reference points to allow the reader to retain or refresh the details with greater ease. A few photographs would have provided visual context and perhaps another layer of credible evidence.

In 2005, the year after the release of "The Condor Years," dogged pursuit, timing and fate colluded to provide justice. The author's book and interviews with a judge pursuing Pinochet, may have contributed in no small measure, to helping the case against the dictator, which ultimately resulted in his arrest for the second time.

In writing this book, Dinges has also contributed vastly to the documentation of the darkest hour of Latin American history. Given what was at stake, both in terms of the human death toll and the lessons that can be drawn for U.S. foreign policy engagement, one only wishes that it could have come out much earlier.