

Obama in Chile: Pinochet and Cuba

By Arnold August, October 2011

Chile was the next leg of Obama's March 2011 trip to Latin America. For the vast majority of people in Latin America, as well as many in North America and Europe, Chile invokes the memorable event of September 11, 1973. This was the universally recognized, U.S.-organized military coup d'état. It was directed against the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. Resulting from the coup, tens of thousands of people were imprisoned, tortured, killed, forced into exile or disappeared. All left-wing socialist and communist organizations were violently suppressed. Allende, one of the icons of Latin-American socialist and revolutionary personalities, himself died on that day in the Moneda Palace (government building).

On March 21, 2011, in the Moneda, Obama, along with his host, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, addressed invited guests and some journalists in a press conference. In his opening remarks, Obama did not refer to the 1973 military coup nor, of course, to U.S. responsibility, but he did mention that Chile has "built a robust democracy." The first question asked by a journalist addressing Obama, despite his comments about transition to democracy, was

In Chile ... there are some open wounds of the dictatorship of General Pinochet. And so in that sense, leaders, political leaders, leaders of the world, of human rights, even MPs ... have said that many of those wounds have to do with the United States.... In that new speech ... do you include that the U.S. is willing to collaborate with those judicial investigations, even that the United States is willing to ask for forgiveness for what it did in those very difficult years in the '70s in Chile?¹

Obama, the same person who wrote and spoke on several occasions, quoting or paraphrasing William Faulkner, "The Past Isn't Dead and Buried,"^{2: 3} did not mention the 1973 coup in his opening remarks. In response to the correspondent's question, he referred to the coup only as evidence of an "extremely rocky" relationship between the U.S. and Chile. This was followed by his statement that we should not be "trapped by our history," that he "can't speak to all of the policies of the past," and repeated once

again the importance of “understand[ing] our history, but not be[ing] trapped by it.”⁴

In the same vein of avoiding the role of the U.S. in the 1973 coup, during another address in the Moneda several hours later, he was forced to make a vague reference to it. He referred to the Moneda where “Chile lost its democracy decades ago.” He also made a frontal attack on Cuba. He ignored the U.S. anti-communist orientation that motivated the 1973 coup against the Allende socialist government supported by the Chilean communists. Cuba and Chile while being led by Allende had very fraternal, mutual relationships. Nevertheless, Obama vowed, “support for the rights of people to determine their own future — and, yes, that includes the people of Cuba.”⁵

People should not be surprised by Obama’s selective use of history regarding the 1973 coup in Chile. Obama notified in his second book, to those who were interested to know, where he stands on the issue of military coups versus progressive or socialist thought and action. He wrote,

At times, in arguments with some of my friends on the left, I would find myself in the curious position of defending aspects of Reagan’s world view. I didn’t understand why, for example, progressives should be less comfortable about oppression behind the Iron Curtain than they were about brutality in Chile.⁶

It is important for people to reflect seriously upon Obama’s manipulation of history and political content that is embedded in his use of the past. Together, they form the manner in which Obama and the U.S.-type of multi-party, competitive democracy use selective history with the goal of distancing themselves (in the case of Obama) from the previous administrations and, indeed, the entire history of U.S. military interventions in the hemisphere. This process is carried out in order to provide a “new face” to U.S. intrusion. This course of action even goes so far as to co-opt *opposition* to the decades-long U.S. policy so that this resistance is retrieved in order to applaud the new U.S. image under Obama. He goes to the Moneda, where the U.S. was responsible for the death of Allende. Obama uses the hostility against the U.S.-organized coup and the pro-Allende sentiment. He does so by attempting to convert it in *favour* of the U.S. and by giving the impression that the U.S. is turning the page and that the Chilean people can rely on him. We recall, as mentioned above, Obama’s comment in his second book regarding his frustration about progressives and the

left standing up against the coup in Chile. He juxtaposed this progressive political tendency to repression behind the Iron Curtain. Obama's view on the Iron Curtain versus Chile reflects a very important traditional stance of U.S.-foreign policy. Irrespective of what opinion one has about the former U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe of the 1970s and 1980s, what has been the age-long policy of the U.S. since the 1917 October Revolution? The course of action has been to support anything that opposes socialist, progressive and revolutionary ideas and actions. Taking the twentieth century alone, there was the initial support for the fascists in Germany and Italy leading up to World War II (because it had in its cross hairs the U.S.S.R.). There were also the innumerable, bloody undertakings in Latin America throughout the century (El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil, Grenada, etc.). It is well known with whom the U.S. has always sided and against which forces it fought. It is no accident that Obama's main role model is Ronald Reagan. Obama is following his example. His selective use of history is in the service of this policy, trying to give it a new aura. What remains a problem to be solved is that many people still turned a blind eye to Obama's writing and utterances, a haziness caused by the U.S.-centric, prejudiced faith in the legend that the U.S. presidential two-party system can really compete between programs of "change" and "status quo."

¹ Obama, Barack. 2011a. "Remarks by President Obama and President Sebastian Piñera of Chile at Join Press Conference." White House (March 21). At <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/21/remarks-president-obama-and-president-sebastian-pinera-chile-join-press->>.

² Obama. 2009. "A More Perfect Union: 'The Race Speech,' March 18, 2008." In Jaclyn Easton (ed.), *Inspire a Nation: Barack Obama's Most Electrifying Speeches From Day One of His Campaign Through His Inauguration*. Publishing 180, p. 63.

³ Obama. 2004. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. NY: Random House, Inc., p. x.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Obama. 2011b. "Remarks by President Obama on Latin America in Santiago, Chile." White House (March 21). At <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/21/remarks-president-obama-latin-america-santiago-chile>>.

⁶ Obama. 2006. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. NY: Vintage.