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que escribí para el New York Times,
a pedido del

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Pinochet Without Hatred

With her country still reeling, the niece of the Chilean dictator's most prominent victim renders her own verdict. By ISABEL ALLENDE

Many years ago, I was asked whether I planned someday to write a novel about Pinochet. No, I said, because as a character he was insignificant. I need to retract that statement: one can say anything about him except that he is insignificant. The general has held Chile in his grip for 25 years and is still the most influential figure in the country. A decade after he stepped down from the presidency, the old dictator still holds the democratic Government hostage.

For now, however, the general, too, is being held. He is under house arrest in a London mansion, awaiting a final decision on an extradition request by a Spanish magistrate, Baltasar Garzn, who has accused him of crimes against humanity -- genocide, torture and terrorism -- committed against Spanish citizens in Chile.

The request ignited a debate in Britain and Chile and throughout the West on the wisdom and fairness of bringing former rulers to trial for human rights violations. As far as Augusto Pinochet is concerned, however, the intellectual questions are moot. By pursuing the general, assembling a strong legal case and issuing the extradition request, Garzn has already achieved the salutary result of Pinochet's moral ruin. Henceforth, a man who had the gall to pose as his nation's savior will take his place alongside Caligula and Idi Amin. Even if Pinochet never faces a tribunal, justice has been done.



Photograph by Steve Pyke/Matrix

Before 1973, no one could have imagined a dictatorship in Chile, a nation so proud of its democratic institutions that we Chileans called ourselves "the English" of our continent. How, then, did this soldier, never characterized by intelligence, culture or courage, come to hold absolute power? Just as at a critical moment Adolf Hitler embodied the frustrations and aspirations of millions of Germans, Pinochet led Chile along a path that many wanted. Neither Hitler nor Pinochet could have existed without the tacit or explicit consent of millions of citizens.

Isabel Allende is the author of "The House of the Spirits" and numerous other novels.

Augusto Pinochet has long stood as a symbol of brutality for the simple reason that he was and always will be linked to Salvador Allende, an icon of social justice in the early 1970's. Allende was the first Marxist politician in the world to win the presidency of a country in a free election. In the middle of the cold war, he proposed "the Chilean road toward Socialism," respecting the Constitution and all the rights of the citizens. His dream was to build the kind of Social Democratic

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government that every country in Europe -- except Spain and Ireland -- has today.

Salvador Allende was my father's cousin; in a Latin family, that made him my uncle. I knew him well and loved him with a mixture of admiration and anxiety. Although he was a kind man with a good sense of humor, I always felt it was impossible to live up to his standards and expectations. Trained as a physician, he was well acquainted with the needs of the poor. He was a founder of the Socialist Party, and was appointed Secretary of Health at a young age.

In 1970, after three failed attempts, Allende finally won the presidency in a sharply divided election. He was a minority president, having received only 36 percent of the vote. And even then, his coalition, Unidad Popular, was made up of several parties that rarely saw eye to eye on anything. It was a political weakness that was to stalk his presidency.

But that wasn't his biggest problem. Immediately after the election results were in, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Chilean right began a campaign of terror to prevent him from assuming his post. They planned the kidnapping of Ren Schneider, the commander in chief of the armed forces, in order to provoke a military coup. But the plot backfired, Schneider was killed and Allende became president.

The Government nationalized the banks, many industries and the copper mines, which represented the country's principal source of revenue and which were in the hands of North American capitalists. At that point the opposition, backed by the C.I.A., undertook a series of actions intended to destabilize the economy. To make matters worse, the Government was paralyzed by power struggles within the Unidad Popular.

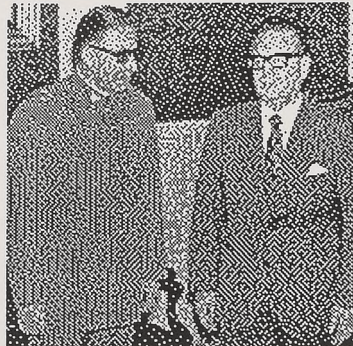
The ensuing economic crisis reached staggering proportions. The inflation rate soared to 350 percent amid shortages of every kind, from food to spare parts for essential machines. Laborers and farmers responded by taking over factories and farms. Armed groups sprang up on the right and the left.

Remarkably, in spite of this somber picture, the Unidad Popular actually increased its percentage of the vote in the 1973 parliamentary elections. In view of this, the opposition decided that economic, political and social destabilization was not enough to finish Allende. More drastic measures were needed.

With the country in an uproar, Salvador Allende decided to hold a plebiscite. He planned to announce it on Sept. 10, as he notified Pinochet (by then the head of the armed forces), but the general asked him to postpone it until the 12th. The President did not live to see that day. On Sept. 11, the military coup took place that would leave a profound mark on Chile's soul. Salvador Allende took his life in the burning presidential palace.

That morning I left my home early. The streets were practically empty, making me think that the bus drivers were striking again. Then I saw military vehicles, tanks and groups of heavily armed soldiers. As I didn't have a radio in the car, I went to the house of a friend nearby to listen to the news. She was very distressed: her husband, a teacher, had gone to the school where he taught, and she had not heard from him. By then all the radio stations, except one, had been silenced by the military.

I went downtown to pick up her husband, which is how I ended up witnessing the bombing of La Moneda palace. I heard my uncle's last words on my friend's portable radio. We held hands crying as he calmly addressed the country with a historic speech that later would be broadcast and published all over the world.



Pinochet, left, and Salvador Allende three weeks before the 1973 coup in which Allende lost his life.

Having declared that he would never resign his office, he refused to flee the country in a plane offered by the generals. It was the right choice, and not only because his heroic death confirmed his place in history. Had he accepted their offer to go into exile, we now know, Pinochet would have murdered him during the flight. "Kill the bitch and you eliminate the litter," he said.

Photograph by Agence France-Presse

Until just before the coup, Pinochet was an obscure army general. He had been elevated to the rank of commander in chief of the armed forces by Allende himself only three weeks before, after Gen. Carlos Prats resigned under pressure from the opposition. Prats recommended Pinochet to Allende, saying he was a loyal soldier who could be trusted to uphold the Constitution. (Prats, who ended up in exile in Argentina, was eventually murdered on orders from Pinochet.)

Pinochet was the last to join the insurrection, after the marines, the air force and the police. The military junta that he would soon command abolished Congress, muzzled the press, suspended constitutional guarantees and began the systematic elimination of the left. The right toasted with Champagne while leftists ran for their lives and the rest of the population was dumbfounded.

Pinochet persecuted labor and student leaders, politicians, intellectuals, artists and journalists, as well as all those who were a part of the Government of the Unidad Popular. The worst repression was carried out against the lower classes, long viewed by the military as the prime breeding ground of Marxism. The people were punished for having dared defy those who had always held political and economic power.

Thousands of Chileans were arrested, others found asylum in embassies or escaped across the border, while many simply disappeared. Torture centers and concentration camps were set up throughout the country. Hundreds of prisoners were thrown from planes into the sea -- after their bellies were slit open to make sure that they would sink -- or blown to bits or plowed under by bulldozers. Fear became a way of life. Voices of protest were raised in most of the world, because the socialist experiment of Salvador Allende had aroused great sympathy, but Washington supported the dictatorship of Pinochet.

The general changed the Constitution to designate himself president. His desire for legitimacy is one of the many paradoxes of his character. In early photographs he is wearing dark glasses, his arms folded across his chest and his jaw thrust forward in a caricature of the Latin American dictator. Later he modified his image, wearing impeccable suits and shedding the sinister dark glasses.

Today, at 83, Pinochet looks like a sly old grandfather. He declares himself "the defender of Western Christian civilization," is ultraconservative in his politics, nationalistic, like most military men, and considers himself a practicing Catholic -- which apparently to him does not seem a contradiction. His hero is Napoleon, to whom he likes to be compared. There is even a Pinochet Foundation, dedicated to assuring his place in history as the Chilean Napoleon who saved the country from Communism, a task that some "pinochetistas" claim was assigned to him directly by God. If this is not magical realism, it is quite close.

Pinochet is characterized by his cunning. It is a mistake to think of him as obtuse, as one might suppose on hearing some of his opinions. (When a mass grave was discovered with two bodies in each coffin, he said that it was a good way of saving nails.) He surrounded himself with the most intelligent ideologues of the right. He transformed the economy of Chile, moving from social democracy to the capitalism of Milton Friedman, but with little of the freedom promised by the Chicago School.

Pinochet planned to murder Allende during the flight. "Kill the bitch and you eliminate the litter"

Entrepreneurs and investors were in paradise. They enjoyed the benefits of the free market but did not have to deal with unions; workers were plentiful, cheap and submissive. The state still intervened in the economy, but always in favor of the capitalists. Greed became the new religion. Almost everything

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were his words.**

was privatized, even hospitals and public schools.

Taken together, this created an economic boom and the basis for sustained progress, which is the main argument of those who defend Pinochet. But they can't disregard the social costs. This savage capitalist revolution came out of the hides of the poor, who were supposed to be satisfied with the crumbs trickling down from the wealthy. For the poorest of the poor, the trickle-down never did occur. Today, a third of Chile's 15 million inhabitants still live in poverty.

Pinochet's Constitution obligated him to call a plebiscite in 1988 to determine whether Chileans wanted to extend his mandate for another eight years or to call democratic elections. He lost and -- give the devil his due -- accepted the decision of the people. In 1990, Chile entered into a "transition to democracy" by electing a Christian Democrat candidate.

Why did he do it? His supporters would have us believe that he felt his historic work was done, and that it was time to turn over the tiresome details of governing to lesser mortals. In fact, the winds were shifting against him. The generals of the Air Force and the Navy had announced that they would accept the results of the referendum. And with the cold war winding down, the United States no longer supported brutal regimes in Latin America.

Before handing over command, Pinochet made certain that his back was covered and that control was still in his hands. He remained as commander in chief of the armed forces until 1998, when he had himself declared senator for life. He appointed senators to guarantee that the right would control the Congress and thus prevent the Constitution he had imposed on the nation from being changed. A law of amnesty granted him impunity for all crimes committed during his tenure.

Pinochet's supporters explain the torture, assassinations and disappearances as a necessary evil in preventing a civil war in 1973. That is preposterous. Salvador Allende had neither the intent nor the capacity to form a dictatorship. He was profoundly democratic, as all his actions proved. The armed forces and the Congress were against him, he did not have the support of the majority and his followers were noncombative. The right still doesn't grasp that it was the military -- not Allende -- that violated the Constitution and imposed a tyranny.

Chile is not a full democracy yet. The Government, trapped in a legal and diplomatic controversy and under pressure from the military, finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having to defend the former dictator on grounds of sovereignty. But Pinochet did not respect the sovereignty of other countries when he ordered the assassination of Orlando Letelier in Washington and General Prats in Buenos Aires. Neither did he oppose the open intervention of the United States in the military coup of 1973.

Although they may detest the General, most Chileans maintain that he should not be judged in a foreign court for crimes committed in Chile. They see the intervention of Spain and Britain as colonialist. How would Americans react if Spain demanded the extradition of Henry Kissinger or a former C.I.A. director to stand trial for the same atrocities that Pinochet is accused of?

There is an obvious double standard when it comes to European and North American relations with less powerful nations. On the other hand, there is no question that Pinochet could never be judged in Chile. Despite the law of amnesty, there are 14 suits against him pending in Chilean courts, but there is little chance that he will ever face justice.

In Chile there is great caution with regard to the general, who still has the support of 25 percent of the population. Among that group is at least 80 percent of the wealthy and all the military. A climate of hysteria reigns among the ultraright. The press, controlled by the right, asserts that Pinochet's detention humiliates all Chileans. According to a recent poll, however, 70 percent of the people don't care about his fate.

The general is still powerful and feared. The military is exerting pressure, but there is no real danger of a coup. Certainly, they are offended by Pinochet's arrest, and they don't want an investigation of the crimes of the past. But I doubt that they would lift a single rifle in his defense. The young generals are not comfortable being identified with the dictatorship; in a world that

The young generals are not comfortable being recruited with the dictatorship, in a world that aspires to global justice, maybe they feel that it's time to clean up their image.

The right, however, is capitalizing on the situation, polarizing the nation in an effort to break the coalition of democratic parties, Concertacin, that has governed for a decade. Paradoxically, social democratic forces are the most endangered by the Pinochet case, because the more conservative factions of Concertacin could be tempted to break ranks and align themselves with the right. Thus, it's in the left's interest to bring the general back safely to Chile.

In Santiago in early December, just before the British Home Secretary agreed to allow the extradition, the atmosphere was tense. When it became clear that Pinochet was not returning anytime soon, there was a sense of relief and the cloud of fear began to lift. People talked openly in the streets. On television shows, Pinochet was not called "senator for life" anymore, but "the former dictator." Leftist politicians and victims of human rights abuses were on TV daily expressing their opinions.

But don't get me wrong; fear still reigns in Chile; 17 years of terror left a mark. My country is traumatized, like an abused child that is always expecting the next blow. The right is afraid of losing its privileges, and for good reason. If Pinochet is destroyed, the dike that has protected it for a quarter century will burst. The left fears the possibility of another coup and the horrific repression of the past. The Government fears the military and a polarization that would bring unrest and instability. And the rest of the people fear the truth.

For years, Chileans have lived in a fragile peace based on silence and prudence; few desire confrontation. Because of fear we have swept memory under the rug. We feared words, we feared calling things by their names, we walked on eggshells, we spoke in euphemisms, we treated each other with caution and suspicion. That is the heritage of this doleful patriarch: a nation in fear. Although we still have a long way to go, it is refreshing to see the beginning of the end of the reign of fear.

I feel no hatred for Pinochet. Hatred is a very heavy burden, one I shook off many years ago, when I started writing. Writing has allowed me to exorcise most of my demons and transform my pain into strength. I would like to see him face a trial, so that the truth about his crimes is fully exposed. But I don't want the general to rot in prison, as so many of his victims did. He has already suffered an undeniable defeat that nothing can turn into victory.

Even without a trial, in the eyes of the world he is an alleged criminal, and moral censure can be worse than prison. I merely wish that in the winter of his life the general would ask forgiveness of all those whose lives he destroyed, the families of the dead and disappeared, the exiled and tortured; that he would reveal where the bodies of his victims can be found. Only then, with the recognition of past errors, will a true reconciliation among Chileans begin.

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