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- Business
- Sports
- Tech-Science
- Living
- Travel
- Health
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- Opinions
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A General's Daughter

Michelle Bachelet, Latin America's first female Defense minister, aims to keep the troops in line

By Joseph Contreras
NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

Aug. 12 issue — One of Chilean President Ricardo Lagos's boldest moves was to transfer Health Minister Michelle Bachelet to another cabinet position earlier this year—Defense minister. Bachelet, a 50-year-old pediatrician by training, is the first female to ever hold that job in the bastion of old-fashioned machismo that is Latin America.

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BUT HER APPOINTMENT is interesting for another reason: her father, Alberto Bachelet, was a Chilean Air Force general and one of the more prominent victims of the country's 14-year-long dirty war. He stood by the late Salvador Allende in the bloody 1973 military coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power, and suffered for it. Bachelet was arrested, tortured and later died in prison within months of the takeover.

Bachelet has "suffered" from that personal loss, she says. But she insists she harbors no ill will toward the armed forces that she now heads. She took the job, she told NEWSWEEK, because "I felt I could serve as

a bridge between the military and civil society." That the

the top brass voiced no objection to her appointment reflects, in part, her impressive qualifications. Bachelet gained a thorough grounding in national-security issues in the 1990s as a standout student at military academies in Santiago and Washington, and later served as a policy adviser to the Defense Ministry under Lagos's predecessor, Eduardo Frei.

Bachelet is a lifelong member of the Socialist Party, and experts say that fact, more than her gender, is a milestone in Chile. "It would have been inconceivable only a few years ago to imagine a Socialist politician heading up the Defense Ministry," says Guillermo Holzmann of the University of Chile in Santiago. Bachelet has stoutly defended the Lagos government's controversial decision to buy a squadron of 10 F-16 fighter jets—the first sale of American high-performance military hardware to a Latin American country in two decades.

A blond divorcee with three children, Bachelet has become a celebrity of sorts since taking over the defense portfolio. But she's got a tough challenge ahead—cutting back some of the many perks that the armed forces have come to enjoy. Though Chile faces no credible military threat, the country has one of the highest per capita defense-spending levels in Latin America. In addition to its normal

budget, the armed forces are entitled to spend 10 percent of the country's annual copper-export revenues, or roughly \$340 million, in whatever way they wish. What's more, the president must first seek the generals' permission before firing the head of any branch of the armed services. Bachelet shares President Lagos's desire to strip the military of such constitutionally granted prerogatives. But the right wing's staunch opposition to such reforms may preserve the military's extraordinary powers long after Lagos finishes his term in March 2004. If so, Bachelet says she'll concentrate her energies on trying to instill within the military a greater respect for civilian oversight. "I feel a pressing need to guarantee to future generations that what happened [with the dirty war] will never happen again." She need only look at the desktop portrait of her late father to remember why.

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