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Facilitating Communications and Murder: Operation Condor and United States Complicity

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Abstract. This article explores levels of United States Government (USG) complicity during the late 1970s in the murder of individuals alleged to have been left-wing opponents of South American, right-wing, authoritarian governments.

A number of journalistic and advocacy sources have alleged that the USG facilitated communications among the representatives of South American, right-wing, authoritarian government intelligence chiefs. This facilitation is said to have been especially egregious during the late 1970s when the chiefs were jointly working to capture, torture, interrogate, and murder individuals alleged to be members of left-wing groups opposing their respective governments. This joint covert program--known as Operation Condor--is often judged to represent the antithesis of USG promulgated values of free speech, freedom of association, democracy, and inalienable human rights.

A 1978 cable from the US Embassy in Asuncion to the Office of the US Secretary of State in Washington--a cable that was at one time confidential but later downgraded to unclassified--is purportedly the smoking gun of USG complicity. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the cable describe the essence of Operation Condor: the involvement of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay; a fight to the death against "subversion;" and a commitment to hand over "subversives" apprehended in one country to the government of the country viewing the individual as a threat. Paragraph 3 also states that the governments communicate on these matters (in code) through a US communication installation in the Panama Canal Zone. The paragraph goes on to state that the installation is (1) used mainly by student officers to call home, (2) also used to coordinate intelligence about South American countries of the "Southern Cone," and (3) viewed (by the US diplomat writing the cable) as practically useless and serving to inflate the importance of the various Operation Condor intelligence chiefs. Paragraph 4 asserts that the USG has been aware of Operation Condor "over the last few years." The concluding paragraph states that if a US communications installation is being used for Operation Condor, then a USG review would be necessary to assure that its continuation is in US interests.

Certainly, there is information in the cable (if authentic and accurate) with which to damn the USG--especially that the USG has known about Operation Condor but has apparently not seriously tried to end it. Of course, even the latter conclusion is based only on the omission of any information about attempts to end it or the consequences of these attempts. There is no information on the active facilitation of Operation Condor by the USG--instead only what may be monitored or unmonitored usage of a communications asset by South American officers with putatively little operational import of any kind. If anything, the usage might be more rightly presented as an intelligence opportunity for the USG to influence these and officers in a manner consonant with US interests.

The overinflation of US complicity based on the cable can only impede efforts to identify and resolve matters of past human rights violations and impede those of the future. This overinflation may have a number of psychological sources including intentional misrepresentation, anti-US and anti-USG cognitive schemata, diabolical causation schema (Kofta, 1995), the unconscious dynamics of oppression (Schofield, 1999), conspiracy mania (Quinby, 1999), various individual difference variables of personality

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(Abalakina-Paap, et al, 1999), availability heuristics, preservation of enhancement of self-esteem and self-image, enmeshment in ethnosociological narrative (Waters, 1997), a Bayesian analysis that larger conspiracies are more instrumentally effective than smaller ones (McCauley & Jacques, 1979), and base rates of conspiracies of silence among holders of political power in various sociocultural contexts (Quadrio, 1994). Basic and applied research on such sources can enrich scientific psychology as well as contribute to human rights. (See Abalakina-Papp, M., Stephan, W.G., Craig, T., & Gregory, W.L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, 20, 637-647; Kofta, M. (1995). Stereotype of a group as a whole: The role of diabolical causation schema. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 26, 83-96; McCauley, C., & Jacques, S. (1979). The popularity of conspiracy theories of presidential assassination: A Bayesian analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 637-644; Quadrio, C. (1994). Sexual abuse involving therapists, clergy, and judiciary: Closed ranks, collusions, and conspiracies of silence. *Psychiatry, Psychology, and Law*, 1, 189-198; Quinby, L. (1999). Millennial civilization and its discontents: Terminal cynicism, conspiracy mania, and avatarism. *Psychohistory Review*, 27, 33-46; Schofield, G. (1999). Unconscious dynamics of oppression. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 4, 318-322; Second meeting with Chief of Staff re Letelier case. (131905Z Oct 78). FM AMEMBASSY ASUNCION TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4266; U.S. diplomatic cable on Operation Condor. (March 6, 2001). *SECURITY NEWS*; Waters, A.M. (1997). Conspiracy theories as ethnosociologies: Explanation and intention in African American political culture. *Journal of Black Studies*, 28, 112-125.) (Keywords: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Conspiracy, Operation Condor, Paraguay, Uruguay.)