

# Review of *Predatory States*

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J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. Lanham, MD and Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

THIS FASCINATING BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF OPERATION CONDOR, “A SECRET intelligence and operations system created in the 1970s through which the South American military states shared intelligence and seized, tortured, and executed political opponents in one another’s territory” (p. 1). It is a book that I wish all Americans would read, since it offers a wealth of information about, and penetrating insights into, U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. Since I am not in a position to determine what Americans do or do not read, I did what I could to ensure a wider reading audience: I assigned the book in my class on Modern Latin American History. In this review, I will both discuss the book and my students’ responses to it.

In the 1960s, popular and leftist movements gained power and support throughout the Southern Cone nations of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia. These movements posed concrete challenges to the wealthy elites who ran these nations and to the U.S. corporations that extracted sizable profits from them. To counter and remove the threat, military governments seized power in all the Southern Cone nations, beginning with Brazil in 1964 and culminating with Argentina in 1976. Acting in conjunction with the national elites who sought to eliminate the threat the Left posed to their economic and political power, the Southern Cone militaries overthrew governments, installed themselves in power, and instituted reigns of terror. However, as this book illustrates, neither national boundaries nor historically antagonistic relationships restrained the reach of the military dictatorships that took power. Instead, the intelligence services and repressive branches of these armed forces worked together to exchange information and prisoners in a joint effort to remove any place of refuge for those who were fleeing the terror in their own nation. This joint project, which I think of as the Transnational Corporation of Repression, was Operation Condor, which represented a critical aspect of the Southern Cone militaries’ strategy to eliminate the leftist and popular movements that had gained strength in the region. The U.S. government was aware of Operation Condor and contributed resources to make it possible.

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McSherry argues that Operation Condor had six defining features, which she explains and illustrates. Operation Condor specialized in “cross-border and foreign operations against exiles.” Since it involved militaries of several different nations, it was also “multinational [in] character.” It featured a “precise and selective targeting of dissidents.” Thus, Operation Condor activities did not lead to the arrest of large numbers of people; rather, it focused on key activists and leaders, individuals whom military intelligence believed to be most capable of organizing opposition to dictatorial rule. Fourth, Operation Condor has a “parastatal structure,” which McSherry defines as the “forces and infrastructure of ‘black world’ special operations.” In other words, Operation Condor was neither publicly announced nor acknowledged, which allowed the military to carry out its lethal work undetected, except, of course, by the victims of its actions and their fellow activists and families. Another characteristic of Operation Condor was its use of “advanced technology,” an area in which the U.S. government was of particular assistance (pp. 7–9). The U.S. government offered the dictatorships telecommunication technology, computers, and security, which allowed them to set up their secret communication system, Condortel. As McSherry later points out, “the unavoidable conclusion is that select U.S. forces had complete knowledge of—and provided unambiguous support to—Condor intelligence and hunter-killer operations through the communications network” (p. 96). The Southern Cone militaries used this system to exchange information on the whereabouts of activists, which in turn led to their capture, torture, and, in most cases, murder. The final distinguishing feature of Operation Condor McSherry lists is that it used “criminal syndicates and extremist networks and organizations to carry out operations” (p. 9).

As should be clear from the above, McSherry presents convincing evidence to illustrate the nature and extent of U.S. government awareness of, and involvement in, Operation Condor. As part of its Cold War policies, the U.S. military had developed close political, tactical, and strategic relationships with the Latin American armed forces. It trained them in U.S. bases in Panama, sold them weapons, and offered them the ideological justification that their enemy was internal, insidious, and dangerous; thus, any and all measures were allowed, indeed encouraged, in the war against such enemies. Drawing on declassified documents released by the State Department and other U.S. government agencies, McSherry shows that officials such as Henry Kissinger, then President Nixon’s secretary of state, and other officials were aware of the existence of Operation Condor from the time its members first met to lay the foundation for the organization in Buenos Aires in 1974. Neither then nor later did Kissinger lift a finger to prevent the brutal repression, cruel tortures, and cold-blooded assassinations the repressive project carried out.

One of the strengths of the book is the impressive amount of research that McSherry carried out to trace the origins, functioning, impact, and extent of Operation Condor. She has carefully read and analyzed a range of materials, such as relevant declassified documents released by the U.S. government and archives and reports

from Truth Commissions in Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. In addition, she has talked to many people involved in Operation Condor, including a number of victims who miraculously survived to tell their stories. If there is one criticism I would make of the book, it is that we do not hear enough of the voices of the victims or get a clear enough picture of what they believed they were fighting for and against.

Few of the students in my class knew much about Latin America, except for those Latinos who had family ties and had visited relatives there, usually in Mexico. Politically, they ranged from progressive to fairly conservative, with most of them being skeptical of U.S. government claims that the goal of its foreign policy was solely to help people. Although some of them were very critical of the U.S. war in Iraq, none of them, at least to my knowledge, has been involved in any anti-war activity, left organization, or social movement. Since I teach in a technical school, most students are not liberal arts majors and do not tend to be heavy readers of nonfiction books.

To a student, they loved the book, learned a lot from it, said they would recommend it to friends, and urged me to include it on future class reading lists. They read the book toward the end of the course, after we had already discussed the Southern Cone military dictatorships and why they were repressive, the U.S. government's relationship to and support for military rule, and the practices of political imprisonment, torture, and disappearance. What struck me was that most of the students focused on and wanted to talk about the U.S. government's involvement in Operation Condor. One of the more conservative students said, "I don't understand why the U.S. government, which right now is fighting terrorism, would support these military dictatorships." Perhaps inevitably, our discussions about the tactics of Operation Condor, such as the sad fact that the military dictatorships routinely tortured those they considered their enemies, led to conversations about Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo and the U.S. government's use of torture today. In this class, unlike some other classes that I have taught, none of the students supported the use of torture and all found it both objectionable and contrary to the notion of democracy that they uphold.

As a group, the students found McSherry's meticulous research, combined with her careful and judicious conclusions, convincing. She clearly stated where she got her information, what she could determine from the materials available to her, and what she suspected but, given the lack of evidence, could not in all honesty state with certainty. Although much of what she wrote about the U.S. government came as a shock—i.e., that in pursuit of its economic and political goals, it willfully and knowingly supported the overthrow of democratic governments and the imposition of dictatorships that cruelly and coldly imprisoned, tortured, murdered, and disappeared those it labeled the enemy—none of the students rejected either her fundamental thesis or the evidence she drew upon to arrive at it. However, they

did not blindly or uncritically accept the material they read or the interpretations I offered in the class as a whole.

It is difficult to gauge what impact the pictures of Abu Ghraib or the images of Guantánamo have had on the American public. I do not know how students would have responded to this book ten or even five years ago, before these pictures and images were familiar to them. (It is noteworthy, even astounding, that in this class, as in one I taught two years ago, not all of the students have heard of Abu Ghraib or know that the U.S. military has carried out torture.) However, the book makes it clear that what took place in Abu Ghraib, and is most likely taking place even now, is not an aberration but has been an essential component of U.S. government policy, albeit in certain situations and against certain people.

Among the strengths of this book is that it allows students to see the recent use of torture not as an isolated incident carried out by a few rotten apples, but as a conscious policy. McSherry traces the origins of Operation Condor to the U.S. government's formation of "stay behind armies" in Europe following World War II. These stay-behind armies were anticommunist organizations sponsored by the U.S. security apparatus in Western Europe, implanted in the area to fight the Left. McSherry follows this historical thread through Operation Phoenix during the Vietnam War and in the development of counterinsurgency warfare in Latin America, following the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

Just as the origins of Operation Condor were international in scope, so, too, were its actions. Working with Italian fascist forces, Condor agents attempted to kill Bernardo Leighton, a leader of the Chilean Christian Democrats, as well as his wife Anna Fresno, in Rome. In 1976, agents of the Chilean secret service murdered Orlando Letelier, a Chilean, and Ronni Karpen Moffitt, a North American, in Washington, D.C. Also in 1976, in a joint Argentine-Uruguayan operation, agents kidnapped and killed two Uruguayan legislators in Buenos Aires. Operation Condor operatives took their knowledge and tactics to Central America where, in the 1980s, they trained their conservative counterparts in the methods they had used so successfully in the Southern Cone to decimate the Left.

This is a very important book because it brings to light the nefarious ideology and activities of Operation Condor, a covert "black" operation that needs to be revealed and rejected. Because it is well researched and clearly written, it works successfully in an undergraduate classroom; however, it would also educate graduate students as well as the general reading public.