H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kristian Gustafson. *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974.* Dulles: Potomac Books, 2007. xiv + 317 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59797-097-6.

Reviewed by Marc Becker (Department of History, Truman State University)

Published on H-Peace (April, 2008)

Yet Another Book on the Chilean Coup

It is hard to tell what the purpose or audience is for this book. It is said that there are a thousand books on the events leading up to and surrounding the September 11, 1973 coup in Chile, one for every day that Salvador Allende was in office. Kristian Gustafson, a former Canadian army officer and now a lecturer at Brunel University's Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies in England, points to the best of this literature in a brief historiographic overview at the beginning of the book. Particularly notable are Peter Kornbluh's *The Pinochet File* (2003), Jonathan Haslam's *The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende's Chile* (2005), and John Dinges's *The Condor Years* (2004). This book is a minor contribution to a crowded and well-studied field.

Gustafson challenges interpretations that the U.S. government played a key role in the overthrow of Allende's leftist government. This is not as innovative or heretical an argument as it may appear to some on the surface. In what I call an academic/activist divide, solidarity activists often denounce the U.S. government's role while academics tend to look at more factors in explaining the coup. In fact, only emphasizing U.S. government actions tends to disempower Latin Americans, ironically the reverse of what solidarity activists purport to do. Even Chile's nationalistic officer corps, as Gustafson notes, find the emphasis on the U.S. to be insulting to their own agency (p. 204). Instead, approaching the coup from the perspective of what was happening in Chile allows us to understand deep class conflicts in that society. Wealthy conservative Chilean elites would have opposed Allende's socialist reforms whether the United States existed or not. From this perspective, the U.S. government was not a hegemonic force but rather one controlled by elites who sought to build class alliances in other countries to benefit their imperial agenda. Recognizing these class conflicts in Chile leads to a more nuanced interpretation of the coup than simply blaming U.S. imperialism.

But Gustafson is not interested in this line of thought. His focus remains firmly planted on debates within the U.S. security apparatus and not on developments in Chile that led to a highly polarized situation. Instead, in a rather backhanded way, Gustafson seems to argue that the U.S. government should have been *more* engaged in determining the course of events in Chile. Studies stretching back to the early 1970s reveal just how little understanding the Nixon administration had of events in Chile. Gustafson includes Kissinger's famous quip that Chile was "a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica" (quoted, p.100). In *The Pinochet File*, Kornbluh cites internal documents from state department officials that argue that political developments in Chile had little importance for U.S. interests, and that intervention was unwarranted. Gustafson, instead, argues that the U.S. government made a mistake in continuing to support the centrist but leftward-drifting Christian Democrats when the conservative but drifting toward fascism National Party was closer to the Nixon administration's ideology.

This leads me to a second and more fundamental problem with this book. Gustafson complains that debates regarding U.S. government involvement in the coup split into a Left/Right divide over whether to place criminal blame on Nixon and Kissinger. "Like so much else in this world," Gustafson writes, "the truth is somewhere in the middle of these perspectives" (p. 2). He then proceeds to present his study as an objective centrist perspective. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. In his mind, Allende was a dangerous communist who needed to be removed and he never considers the

advances his government made in social policy. Even as the vicious and repressive nature of the Pinochet government became apparent, the Nixon administration continued to favor a fascist military dictatorship rather than an elected, democratic, leftist government. Gustafson dismisses opponents of this policy (including Noam Chomsky) as conspiracy theorists (pp. 91, 203). Even though his focus is on U.S. policy, he fails to consider what it does to the moral authority of a government to employ the rhetoric of democracy but embrace dictatorial policies. Gustafson does his readers a disservice by presenting his argument as growing out of a neutral position, especially since his conservative and pro-imperialist perspective is blatant throughout the book.

And this leads me to my original question concerning the purpose and audience of this book. Those of us on the Left will not be convinced by Gustafson's argument that the Nixon administration should have taken even more aggressive imperialist stances in Chile. Those on the Right probably will find this book as preaching to the choir. Those looking for a good overview of events surrounding the Chilean coup would be better served by reading the books Gustafson points to in his historiographic overview. Those who have read many of the thousand books on the subject will find little new or of interest in this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-peace

Citation: Marc Becker. Review of Gustafson, Kristian, *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974*. H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14399

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.