

# Pinochet a hero to many

**B**UENOS AIRES — During my last trip to Moscow, a high-ranking Soviet official peered into his fourth glass of vodka and said to me: "What we need here in the USSR is General Pinochet."

This was a pretty funny quip for an official whose party regularly blasts the strongman who has ruled Chile for the past 17 years as a "neo-fascist reactionary." Pinochet is only slightly more popular in the western media and among the left, for whom he is the Great Satan of the Right.

Last October, Pinochet held a plebiscite in which he asked Chileans to continue his two-fisted rule. They voted no and then went on to elect Patricio Aylwin, a moderate Christian Democrat, as president. Aylwin assumes office this month.

But Chile has not seen the last of the 73-year-old general, who will remain army commander for eight more years.

Capt.-Gen. Augusto Pinochet may be reviled in North America and the East, but for an increasing number of Latin Americans, he is becoming, ironically, a hero. Just last week, Argentina's nominally socialist leader, Carlos Menem, hailed Pinochet as the "savior of Chile" and hinted strongly that he might follow the general's example unless Argentina's unruly unions behaved.

To understand this curious phenomenon, go back to the early 1970s. A Marxist president, Salvador Allende, had come to power in a three-way split election. Allende was strongly supported by Cuba and the USSR, as well as Chile's powerful left.

Allende promised subsidized food, massive welfare benefits, government jobs for everyone and a chicken in every pot. Chile, a small nation of only 12.7 million with no natural resources, simply couldn't afford to pay for Allende's wild populist schemes. To Chile's left and the foreign liberal media, Allende was a Latin saint. Middle class Chileans, who make up the nation's majority, saw Allende as a Marxist demagogue run amok.

Chile's economy spun out of control. Inflation raged. Savings were wiped out. Allende's programs bankrupted the government and nation.

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With secret U.S. backing, the armed forces, led by Gen. Pinochet, finally staged a coup in which Allende was killed under still-mysterious circumstances.

For the next decade, the armed forces fought a long, dirty war against deadly Marxist urban guerrillas. The Marxists used bombings, kidnappings and assassinations. The armed forces fought back with equal ferocity, occasional torture and selective executions. Liberals around the world bayed at Pinochet and his rough tactics.

Extreme violence, however, proved the only way to break the back of the Marxist terrorist campaign. Pinochet then turned to the ravaged economy. Heeding the advice of a team of U.S.-trained free market economists, Pinochet slashed government spending, cut taxes, lifted import and exchange controls, and encouraged private enterprise. He threw redundant workers out of jobs and rejected demands by left-wing unions for higher wages and benefits. The result was dramatic.

Today Chile has Latin America's healthiest economy. Inflation, the monster that is fast destroying neighboring Argentina, Peru, and Brazil, is no longer a menace. The foreign debt is under control. Chile's economy is growing in a steady, measured manner. Most Chileans accepted Pinochet's benevolent paternalism as a fair trade for economic sanity. As the economies of most other Latin American nations go from bad to catastrophic, increasing numbers of people are looking at Chile's near miracle, particularly now that socialism and Marxism have been so thoroughly discredited everywhere.

For many people, the answer is economic dictatorship. People generally bring in dictators for economic, not political reasons. Mussolini and Hitler came to power as economic dictators who quickly saved their nations from hyperinflation, mass unemployment and growing chaos. Pinochet did the same, but he proved to be a gentle, humane autocrat.

Many Latins are now saying: "My life savings have been wiped out by inflation. I can't send my children to school or even give them enough food. Our governments are useless. Only a dictator can solve this horrible mess."

Hungry, furious people don't care about the niceties of parliamentary politics. They want immediate action. Military action. Soldiers have galloped to the rescue many times in Latin America's stormy past. Nearly all have made as bad a hash of the economy as the civilians.

The exception: Gen. Pinochet, who was wise enough to listen to the right experts and to know just how many heads to bang together. And strong enough to say that one word to the ever-demanding public that our own spineless politicians cannot ever seem to utter: "No!"