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New questions about Kissinger role in 1970s Latin death plot

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Andrew Zajac and David S. Cloud
Washington Bureau
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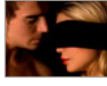


WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON -- A newly declassified document has added to long-standing questions about whether Henry Kissinger, while secretary of State, halted a U.S. plan to curb a secret program of international assassinations by South American dictators. The document, a set of instructions cabled from Kissinger to his top Latin American deputy, ended efforts by U.S. diplomats to warn the governments of Chile, Uruguay and Argentina against involvement in the covert plan, known as "Operation Condor," according to Peter Kornbluh, an analyst with the National Security Archive, a private research organization that uncovered the document and made it public Saturday. In the cable, dated Sept. 16, 1976, Kissinger rejected a proposed warning to the government of Uruguay about Condor operations and ordered that "no further action be taken on this matter" by the State Department. Five days after Kissinger's message, Chilean exile Orlando Letelier and a colleague were killed in Washington in a car bombing later tied to Chilean secret police working through the Condor network. The murders are considered one of the most brazen acts of terrorism ever carried out in the capital. "The document confirms that it's Kissinger's complete responsibility for having rescinded a cease-and-desist order to Condor killers," said Kornbluh, author of a 2004 book on Pinochet. In a statement, Kissinger said Kornbluh "distorted" the meaning of the cable and said it was intended only to disapprove a specific approach to the Uruguayan government, but not to cancel the plan to issue warnings to other nations in the Condor network. Former State Department officials who worked under Kissinger during that period now say the instructions interrupted the U.S. effort to rein in Operation Condor not just with Uruguay but with other countries in the region. After being told of the existence of Condor by the CIA in mid-1976, Kissinger initially ordered U.S. ambassadors in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and other countries involved in the terror network to issue demarches, or formal diplomatic presentations, warning leaders that "Condor activities would undermine relations with the United States." "The instructions were never rescinded," Kissinger said in his statement. But it has been known for many years that U.S. ambassadors to Chile and Uruguay balked at delivering the demarches, stalling the effort to head off Condor. The Uruguayan envoy feared for his own safety, previously disclosed documents have shown, and U.S. officials were devising a new way to deliver the U.S. warning to Montevideo. Kissinger said his cable was intended only to delay the delivery of the demarche to Uruguay, because of "very special circumstances," and not to cancel warnings to other Condor countries. Kissinger apparently was referring to the Uruguayan ambassador's fears. However, shortly after Kissinger's order that "no further action be taken," his top Latin America deputies moved to cancel U.S. warnings to other countries as well. On Sept. 20, then-Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Harry Shlaudeman told his deputy, William Luers, to inform U.S. ambassadors in countries involved in Condor not to convey Washington's concerns about the operation. The Letelier murder occurred the next day. There is no evidence that Kissinger knew of the Letelier plot or the specifics of any other assassination plans. But the delays in issuing the demarches meant Chile apparently received no high-level U.S. warning about Condor before the bombing. Shlaudeman said in an interview that he had no memory of the cable from Kissinger or of his own subsequent message to Luers rescinding the orders to make demarches about Condor. But he acknowledged that the timing and the similar wording of the two documents were strong evidence that he had acted on Kissinger's orders. "I must have sent it because I got the cable from Henry," he said. "I was carrying out my instructions." Luers

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acknowledged that the demarches "were not carried out in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina before Orlando Letelier's murder." He added he does not specifically remember Kissinger's order or the instructions to cancel the demarches. Letelier served as ambassador to the U.S. and foreign minister in the administration of Chilean President Salvatore Allende, who was deposed by Augusto Pinochet in a 1973 coup. At the time of his death, Letelier worked at the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington think tank, and was a leading anti-Pinochet activist in the U.S. An institute colleague, Ronni Moffitt, also died in the bombing. Scholars who have studied U.S. policy toward South American during this period say that Kissinger was reluctant to pressure authoritarian governments in the region, which he saw as bulwarks against the leftist and communist movements in the region. "I think the document reinforces what we already know -- that Kissinger wanted to downplay Condor," said Jeremi Suri, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin and author of a 2007 book on Kissinger. "His primary concern was to maintain good and ... productive relationships with Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Condor was seen as an irritant." The hesitant U.S. response to Condor and to other human rights abuses by these regimes had lasting consequences, Suri argues. "It inadvertently gave a green light to these dictators, who believed the U.S. didn't care if they went ahead with their terrorist operations," he said, and it hurt the reputation of the U.S. with the people of the region, who saw Washington as complicit in the years of repression. Had the demarches been delivered as originally ordered, said J. Patrice McSherry, a professor of political science at Long Island University and author of a 2005 book on Operation Condor, the murders of Letelier and Moffitt might have been prevented. "No one can say for sure. But it's quite possible that it would have been a major deterrent." AZajac@latimes.com David.Cloud@latimes.com

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