

Correspondence

The U.S. Press & Chile

To the Editor: In "Seeing Allende Through the Myths" in the April issue of *Worldview*, Paul Sigmund criticized several times an article I coauthored with Torry Dickinson in the March *Worldview*, "Apologists for Terror: The U.S. Press and Chile." Professor Sigmund is the only Latin American specialist I know who considers mythical the opinion that the U.S. press was hostile to the Allende government and blatantly tolerant, if not solicitous, of the military junta the first few weeks after the coup. Several academicians mentioned in my article have explicitly criticized U.S. press coverage of Chile, and it is not unreasonable to conclude that Professor Sigmund's views are relatively unrepresentative of the opinion of most professors.

The specific points addressed by Professor Sigmund, moreover, rather than refuting the arguments made in our article, quibble with some particulars and rarely address the major issues raised. For example, the Pollock-Dickinson piece did not cite tens of thousands "killed" in Chile after the coup, but rather "killed or imprisoned." Dr. Sigmund's revival of the specter of danger from the Left has been proved so clearly spurious by events, by the obvious power and overkill of the right-wing militarists, that one wonders why he continues to pursue that line of reasoning. To emphasize that the Left is "cold-blooded" in light of what the Right has destroyed is at this point myopic beyond belief. To draw attention to illegal arms importation by the Left when the militarists were receiving greatly increased arms shipments from the U.S. is to miss clearly the significance of all that has happened. To cite the *New York Times* as authoritative in claiming that only 476

bodies were processed by one of the main morgues in the immediate aftermath of the coup, refuting a *Newsweek* article claiming over two thousand, is to ignore the total death estimates made by the CIA, Amnesty International and the U.S. State Department (respectively, 10,000; 13,000; and up to 20,000, cited in a recent issue of *Latin America*, a weekly from Britain).

The Pollock-Dickinson article did not claim that the U.S. press has never opposed the junta, but rather that in the first few weeks after the coup, when the rest of the world press generally expressed horror at the bloody death of democracy in Chile, the U.S. press made efforts to present this denouement as a perfectly natural, logical and, most disturbing of all, justifiable outcome of events. The point is not so much that our press coverage was "one-sided," but rather that it was unique in presenting the repression in Chile in a "balanced" perspective. The number of dead, including many children lying in the streets with newspapers over their faces, the tortures and firing-squad executions in the National Stadium and the massive repression of all political activity, was appropriately condemned by the foreign press. The most reputable U.S. daily papers, however, excepting the *Washington Post*, ran articles which included several perspectives legitimizing junta activity. No conspiracy was needed to achieve this. Rather, a shared cold war orientation or common support for endangered U.S. economic interests in Chile may have prompted the response.

Whatever the appropriate explanation for U.S. reporting on Chile, it certainly gave our press bad marks for its unwillingness to value democracy enough to register the outrage

required by civilized people when faced with the barbarism so clearly evident in Chile after Allende. There is no question this is a shameful episode in the history of the U.S. press. To pretend otherwise is to cheapen our own humanity.

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Paul E. Sigmund Responds:

Professor Pollock's letter is an excellent example of the type of "double-think" against which my article was directed. Because the coup and the right-wing regime which followed it have been cruel and repressive, one may not even discuss the evidence that the Left had its share of responsibility for the tragic events in Chile. Because many people have been killed in Chile since September, one may not even make an effort to determine more precisely the extent of the slaughter. Because there are firing squads, torture and political repression in Chile, any attempt to get a balanced view of what went on in Chile before September 11 is guilty of "legitimizing junta activity."

Our differences on the subject arise out of a more basic disagreement, which is revealed in Professor Pollock's last paragraph. I believe that the primary responsibility of the news media is to provide as far as possible a balanced and informed view of the news, limiting editorial comments to the editorial pages. Admittedly the European press is much better at "registering outrage" in its news columns, but the outrage of *Le Monde* after the overthrow of Allende was matched by equally biased anti-Allende editorializing in the guise of news articles in other publications, such as *The Economist*. A further problem with the moral outrage theory of journalism is that it often plays directly into the hands of those it wishes to denounce by exaggerating or distorting the facts in a way which makes it easy for

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