December 20, 2004

The Colonel, the Bohemian, and General Pinochet

by Rushworth M. Kidder

When Chile's aging former strongman, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, was indicted last week on charges of murder and kidnapping, I was reminded of an extraordinary day that I spent in the Chilean capital, Santiago, in the mid-1990s. First, some background.

Pinochet's infamous rule, which began in 1973 with a coup against the Marxist-leaning president, Salvador Allende, ended in 1990. Chile's National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation published its report in 1991. Amid massive controversy, the Commission offered state-sponsored murderers immunity from prosecution in return for their complete truth-telling.

From those findings the Commission built a meticulous historical edifice. It pointed to horrendous crimes -- deaths, disappearances, torture, rapes -- by the right-wing regime. Yet the economy, which had been sliding toward a Cuba-like paralysis under President Allende, had become one of the beacons in South America. As a gesture of reconciliation, Pinochet's successor, President Patricio Aylwin, allowed the general to remain as head of the armed forces.

In that context, I was invited by Mónica Jiménez de Barros -- a former member of the Commission, an early target of Gen. Pinochet, a member of the Institute's advisory council, and one of the most morally courageous people I know -- to give a daylong seminar on ethics for some leading public figures in Santiago. From the opening introductions, it was clear this would be quite a day. At a table toward the rear sat a group of liberal editors and writers -- long-haired, fiery-eyed, passionate, and articulate. At a table down front were two close-cropped colonels in crisp uniforms who defiantly introduced themselves not merely as *army* officers but as officers in "*General Pinochet's* army."

As we began, I shared with them a framework for thinking about right-versus-right dilemmas, particularly those that pitted justice against mercy. Mónica then shuffled the tables to put officers and journalists together. When we began our small-group discussions of several dilemmas, I steeled myself for outbursts and rage.

They never came. Somewhere in my files there's a photograph of a well-starched colonel and a bohemian journalist leaning across a table toward each other, gesturing. But there's nothing fractious in their interchange. Instead, they're deep in conversation about the moral issues surrounding one of the dilemmas.

At the end of the afternoon, one of the colonels sought me out. Shaking my hand -- clutching it, in fact, until he'd finished what he had to say -- he told me that he wished everyone in the army could have been there. As he spoke, his eyes were moist with feeling.

A moment like that says something powerful about the ability of moral dialogue to bring opposing sides together. But it says even more about the courage of Chileans of every political stripe to face up to the degradation of state-sponsored terror and lay it to rest. The details of those crimes have resurfaced in the wake of Judge Juan Guzmán Tapia's charges. So have some old questions. Should a tyrant stand trial for his crimes, or should a society seek healing by moving beyond the punishment of a frail octogenarian? It's the same dilemma that faced the National Commission, where justice cried out for punishment while mercy demanded some kind of forgiveness.

Yet the judge's bold indictment last week also raises new questions. Does it indicate that Chile has matured to the point that it can implement the kind of justice where murderers get their due? Or does it merely indicate that Chile has hardened to the point of exacting revenge? Will Gen. Pinochet's pending trial respect a core tenet of the National Commission, which is that those who tell the truth win amnesty? If he tells all, will ethics demand that he be forgiven even though the evidence demands that he be punished? Whatever the outcome, will Chilean society be the better or the worse for it?

That last question matters most. Its answer, I think, lies with the colonels and the bohemians of today. If Pinochet's prosecution drives them back to their respective tables of animosity and distrust, Chile itself will be the loser. But if both find closure to a grisly chapter in their nation's grand history -- so that they can continue in civil dialogue with one another -- the judge's effort will have been well rewarded.