

Exclusive: The U.S. Paid Money to Support Hugo Banzer's 1971 Coup in Bolivia

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For nearly four decades, there's been an open question about the 1971 coup that brought dictator Hugo Banzer Suarez to power in Bolivia: was the U.S. government involved? Thanks to newly declassified documents, we now have an answer.

Nota: Puede leer una versi3n traducida al espaol siguiendo este vnculo .Â

Banzer was a dictator of Bolivia from 1971-8 and a democratically elected president from 1997-2001. His three-day coup in August 1971 was significant not only for the fighting that accompanied it, which left 110 dead and 600 wounded, but for the seven-year regime that followed, one of the most repressive in Bolivia's history. Under Banzer's rule, more than 14,000 Bolivians were arrested without a judicial order, more than 8,000 were tortured with electricity, water, beatings and more than 200 were executed or disappeared. (I'm writing this article about the legacy of the regime for Narvaiz's magazine. It will hopefully be out by the end of the year.)

American support for Banzer before and after the coup was never in doubt. He had trained at the School of the Americas in Panama and the Armored Cavalry School in Texas, and in the late 60s served as military attaché in Washington. In the five months after he ousted left-wing dictator General Juan JosĂ© Torres, Banzer was rewarded with \$50 million in grants and aid from the Nixon Administration.

But while U.S. support for Banzer during the coup has been widely assumed among Bolivians and historians of Latin America, the only proof (until now) was a Washington Post report published a week after the event, which said that U.S. Air Force Major Robert J. Lundin had advised the plotters and lent them a long-range radio. The report was never substantiated, however, and the State Department denied it immediately, asserting unequivocally that the U.S. played no part in the overthrow of Torres.

A collection of declassified documents recently released* by the same State Department proves that this denial was not only incorrect, but a lie: the Nixon Administration, acting with the full knowledge of the State Department, authorized nearly half a million dollars in coup money, according to the ambassador in La Paz and political and military officers plotting against Torres. The CIA handed at least some of this money over to the coup's leaders in the days leading up to Banzer's seizure of power.

Minutes from a July 8, 1971 meeting of the 40 Committee (an executive-branch group chaired by Henry Kissinger and tasked with oversight of covert operations) included discussion of a CIA proposal to give \$410,000 to a group of opposition politicians and military leaders, money that they knew would be used to overthrow Torres. (Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson: "what we are actually organizing is a coup in itself, isn't it?") the committee decided to wait to hear from Ambassador Ernest Siracusa (he opposed the measure) the plan was ultimately approved. The same day that the coup began in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, an NSC staffer reported to Kissinger that the CIA had transferred money to two high-ranking members of the opposition.

The CIA proposal had its roots in a June conversation between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, when they decided that Torres's overtures to the Bolivian left wing had gone too far:

Â Â Â Kissinger: We are having a major problem in Bolivia, too. And"

Â Â Â Nixon: I got that. Confronted that. What do you want to do about that?

Â Â Â Kissinger: I've told [CIA Deputy Director of Plans Thomas] Karamessines to crank up an operation, post-haste. Even the Ambassador there, who's been a softy, is now saying that we must start playing with the military there or the thing is going to go down the drain.

Â Â Â Nixon: Yeah.

Â Â Â Kissinger: That's due in on Monday.

Â Â Â Nixon: What does Karamessines think we need? A coup?

Â Â Â Kissinger: We'll see what we can, whether in what context. They're going to squeeze us out in another two

They've already gotten rid of the Peace Corps, which is an asset, but now they want to get rid of USIA and military people. And I don't know whether we can even think of a coup, but we have to find out what the lay of the land is there.

The CIA was almost certainly correct that regardless of U.S. involvement an attempt to oust Torres in the next few months, if not sooner, [was] inevitable. But even though they recognized that supporting the coup was a high risk operation, they decided they might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb:

The U.S. Government will be the logical culprit in the minds of Bolivians. Moreover, we fully expect the CIA to come under fire and accusations of CIA involvement seem inevitable. Since the CIA has been accused regularly (and falsely) of innuendo plots and activities in Bolivia, one more accusation should not cause excessive public reaction.

On August 26, three days after Banzer claimed power, Kissinger and Nixon spoke on the telephone. Kissinger briefed the President on his recent meeting with Vietnam POW wives and the President told Kissinger that the trouble with Reagan is quite clear. He really is simplistic. At the end of the conversation, Kissinger noted, "In Bolivia there has been a coup. It has brought on a right-wing government."

Nixon's response? "What about Chile."

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*In July 2009 the State Department Office of the Historian released volume E-10 of Foreign Relations of the United States 1968-1972, edited by Douglas Kraft and James F. Siekmeier, but withheld the Bolivia chapter until declassification could be completed. The Bolivia documents were released sometime between March 1 of this year and now. I believe this is the first notice of the significance of the Bolivia documents.

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