

Are we reliving Operation Condor? An interview with Atilio Boron

As the Trump administration ignites a war on the Latin American Left with the help of regional proxies, while classifying Americans who protest ICE as domestic terrorists – and uses the designation to justify taking their lives – it feels like the darkest demons of the hemisphere have resurfaced. One of Argentina's most prolific scholars and authors, Atilio Boron, joins The Grayzone's Oscar Leon to set Washington's reactionary repression against the historical backdrop of Operation Condor, the CIA-directed dirty war waged against progressive forces throughout South America in the 1970s and '80s. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Speaker 01

Hey, what's going on, man? I'm here looking for—neighbors captured the scene outside their home, trying to avoid being taken.

#Speaker 02

As masked agents go door to door.

#Speaker 01

What? Please!

#Speaker 02

Grabbing people off the streets, throwing them into unmarked vans, and disappearing them into a pipeline of human rights violations.

#Speaker 01

Likely to be investigated as a homicide—and sometimes death. We thought it was important to revisit one of the original test runs of this blueprint: Operation Condor. Executed in the 1970s as a mechanism to persecute political opposition under Latin America's dictatorships, it's now being recreated, albeit with different characteristics, in some of the same countries that suffered its

original version—and, you could argue, also in the United States. The parallels are striking. Among them, the killing of two American protesters by ICE agents and the subsequent justification by Trump administration officials, who, absent due process, labeled the victims domestic terrorists. Add to this Trump's National Security Memorandum, NSPM-7, which classifies individuals with anti-capitalist beliefs as potential domestic terrorists.

Taken together with the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and the broader war on the left across Latin America, a dark and familiar pattern begins to take shape. Operation Condor is remembered as one of the darkest chapters in modern Latin American history, but something even more disturbing appears to be unfolding across the hemisphere. To explore this subject in depth, who better than Argentine author Atilio Boron—one of the continent's most prolific thinkers, with more than 40 books published and one of the most respected voices among Latin American scholars. Boron has studied structures of power for more than 50 years and holds a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University. Full curricula, books, and seminars can be found on his website.

#Speaker 03

Atilio Boron, thank you for being with us.

#Speaker 01

Thank you very much for the invitation. I'm wearing this hat in solidarity with Suntracs Panama, a large union in Panama that's being fiercely persecuted by the government. So I'll be doing this interview wearing the Suntracs cap—at your service, Oscar.

#Speaker 03

At your service, Oscar.

#Speaker 02

Thank you. We already discussed this topic in a previous interview a few years back, and it's the focus of today's conversation—the new Operation Condor, this asymmetrical form of warfare that the Empire is allegedly applying in its colonies and pseudo-colonies to dominate without the need for a conventional war. We know that many people who watch our program might not be familiar with the original Operation Condor. If you would be so kind, could you briefly explain what it was?

#Speaker 01

Well, look, the original Operation Condor was basically developed beginning in 1973–74. This followed the coup against Salvador Allende and the start of an exodus of comrades from Chile. That phenomenon was later replicated when, in 1975, there was a coup in Uruguay and, in 1976, a coup

in Argentina. Exiles began to scatter throughout the world, and the State Department and the CIA devised a plan to track down these individuals, hold them accountable for the policies implemented in their respective countries, and simply eliminate them. It was, Oscar, a plan of mass extermination—a meticulous hunt for militants of various ranks.

Not necessarily the general secretary of a political party, but also rank-and-file militants who, for example, had been caught putting up a poster against the dictatorship and were forced to flee. They were hunted down in their own countries, searched for in Argentina, in Chile, and elsewhere. In general, however, Operation Condor heavily centralized these operations in Paraguay, then the oldest dictatorship in Latin America, which had a specialized apparatus dedicated to locating, detaining, and torturing people. It was a tremendous, devastating plan that caused enormous pain and death across Latin America—an extermination of anything that could, in any way, foreshadow the resurgence of opposition to the dictatorships being imposed at the time.

#Speaker 02

A couple of characteristics of Operation Condor that are shared with the present day include the dehumanization of a group in the eyes of the general public, which enabled neighbors to call for repression against other neighbors—often not because they were communists, but because they wanted to get them out of the way for selfish reasons. I imagine that if you were part of the general public at the time, say someone who watched the news or TV, the narrative was that these were extremely dangerous people and that by getting rid of them, society was being protected, even saved. They were probably told, as I understand it, that these individuals were terrorists. Tell us a little about that aspect.

#Speaker 03

Well, you see, this is an old tactic that's been used again recently.

#Speaker 01

Now they add “narco” before “terrorist,” because obviously no one today really believes there’s terrorism in Latin America. But in any case, that wasn’t the most important point. The goal was the complete demonization of adversaries—supporters of democracy who opposed the coup d'état. They were inevitably portrayed as guerrillas, terrorists, people who planted bombs, who killed, who tortured—a truly striking process of demonization directed at militants of just causes in Latin America. And indeed, Oscar, the usual dynamic applied: control of the media, which has always been extremely important for the right wing, meant that these absurd beliefs, these totally unfounded accusations, were actually accepted by many people. They thought that even if the dictatorship was bad, these others were murderers and a danger to society, and so on. So it was highly effective—just as it has been effective today, hasn’t it? When they accused President Nicolás Maduro of being the head of a narco-terrorist cartel...

#Speaker 03

And then, after Maduro was kidnapped and taken to the United States, a few days later the Attorney General stated that the Cartel of the Suns had never existed, that it had all been a mistake.

#Speaker 01

In this way, they pulled the wool over people's eyes. They deceived public opinion and mocked it by telling such blatant lies. No, they were not right, nor were they telling the truth.

#Speaker 03

But that's how the story was presented.

#Speaker 02

It's not only that, but as I understand it, at least in Europe there was a proven association between the CIA and various mafia organizations dating back to World War II, and even earlier, which later extended to the persecution of European Communist parties that, after the war, were strong and had significant popular support. It went so far that there was even Operation Gladio, in which NATO and its associates carried out acts of terror and then blamed them on these groups. So we can see that this is a long-standing modus operandi. Here in the United States as well, we've seen reports that the FBI, during the Occupy and Black Lives Matter uprisings, repeatedly created plots and operations trapping activists to then justify persecution and even prosecution. If we move to the present, we see this pattern very clearly, not just in isolated cases.

If we look, for example, at indigenous populations in Argentina, we can see that happening now, where the Mapuche are blamed for allegedly wanting to burn their own land. There are other examples as well. In Ecuador, for instance, there's a case in which a mining company pressured the Ecuadorian government to do something it had never done before—forcibly remove an indigenous community from its ancestral territory so the company could move in. Under the 2008 Constitution and existing laws, that should have been impossible. So we see that this dynamic is now operating at many levels, through what's commonly called lawfare. How do you see this use of lawfare as part of what's being described as a new Operation Condor? And are these countries undergoing not an open but an asymmetrical war?

#Speaker 03

Of course, today Operation Condor no longer aims to physically eliminate dissidents or opponents of right-wing governments, but instead to remove them from the political arena.

#Speaker 01

And the list is impressive. Take Ecuador, for example: former President Rafael Correa, now in Belgium, is facing an extraordinary number of lawsuits, and Vice President Jorge Glas is imprisoned and being denied proper medical care. I recently saw a photo of Glas and was deeply disturbed by how unwell he looked. Then there's Evo Morales, who was overthrown; Cristina Fernández, who continues to face persecution; and Lula, who spent more than a year in prison solely to remove him from the 2018 presidential race—after which there was absolutely nothing to substantiate the charges.

Moreover, Oscar pointed out that the judge who convicted Lula, Sergio Moro, was later rewarded by Bolsonaro with the post of Minister of Justice. This was a clear case of corruption—the judge who barred Lula from the election was compensated for that service. He didn't last long in the role, but the damage had already been done. We also have the persecution of Milagro Sala here in Argentina, the restrictions placed on Amado Boudou that prevent him from running for office, and the case of Julio De Vido. In Chile, Daniel Jadue is in prison. Why? Because he ran a successful administration in Recoleta, lowered medicine prices, and created housing programs for low-income people. They never forgave him for that and found a way to take him down.

#Speaker 03

As you said earlier, this always happens in collaboration with the mafia.

#Speaker 01

That point is crucial. The mafia and political control agencies in Latin America—whether the CIA, the DEA, or local criminal networks—operate in concert. You can't understand drug trafficking to the United States without asking who receives the drugs on the U.S. side. Mexican or Colombian traffickers don't operate by magic. There are U.S.-based counterparts, along with complicit police, customs officials, immigration agents, and local authorities. Gabriel García Márquez once noted that journalism knew a great deal about Latin American traffickers but almost nothing about their counterparts in the United States.

So, the intelligence–mafia connection you mentioned is very real and continues to operate today. And there's another key fact that few people talk about: lawfare is the result of decades of training programs for judges and prosecutors promoted by USAID. For 35 or 40 years, judges from across Latin America have been brought to the United States for courses on the "proper administration of justice." After decades of this conditioning, lawfare eventually runs on its own. These judges and prosecutors know Washington's expectations and act accordingly. In Honduras, for example, the number of political figures barred or expelled from public life through lawfare is staggering. And this is not an isolated case.

#Speaker 03

It's happening across all of Latin America.

#Speaker 02

Not only have they succeeded in imprisoning and cornering leaders, but they've also managed to persuade people to hate those leaders—and to hate nationalist, leftist, and indigenous groups, groups that in reality represent the very people who are being encouraged to dehumanize them. This process is now carried out with the guidance of the media, television, the press, and even the judiciary. What we're witnessing is an impressive concentration of power in the hands of the elites—an unprecedented dominance of the private sector over workers. It almost amounts to neo-feudalism. And we see this today with Trump, don't we? An unprecedented appropriation of everything. Just look at what was taken from Venezuela—the oil seized from a ship, which could amount to piracy. So how do you see this Operation Condor 2.0, this form of neo-feudalism, emerging in the monstrous new world we're living in under Trump?

#Speaker 03

Look, you used a very precise word—monstrous.

#Speaker 01

We are living through a profoundly critical moment in which what little remained of the world order has collapsed—the order that at least guaranteed certain minimum rules: that no country could invade another without consequences, that a government could not enter another country, kidnap a president and take him away, or that no state had the right to intercept an oil tanker on the high seas, seize it, and sell its contents. Those rules provided a basic level of global stability. They had been eroding for some time, but under Trump this process accelerated dramatically, leading to the destruction of the foundations of the international order. This confronts us with entirely new and dangerous situations. Trump appears to be attempting to impose his own version of the Monroe Doctrine—more reactionary and regressive than the original.

#Speaker 03

President James Monroe never prohibited newly independent countries from trading with their former colonial powers.

#Speaker 01

What Trump seeks to do—an approach that will backfire badly—is to prevent Latin American countries from trading with extra-hemispheric powers such as China and Russia. That was never part of the original doctrine, which merely opposed the re-establishment of European colonies in the Americas. This approach cannot succeed because the international system is now irreversibly

multipolar, something many in the United States resist acknowledging. Washington can no longer dictate outcomes at will. The economic interests involved are too significant, and they will force the U.S. government to recognize today's global plurality.

Take oil, for example. Even when Trump offers everything to the oil companies, they know that much of Venezuela's production is tied up in long-term agreements with China and Russia. No company will invest tens of billions of dollars under conditions that could expose them to massive legal risks and losses. The same applies to the absurd so-called Peace Board for Gaza. It looks like a group of wealthy friends trying to privatize land that doesn't belong to them. That land is Palestinian, and its people are still there. What's the plan? To continue ethnic cleansing until more than two million people are eliminated.

This is madness—a historical monstrosity unlike anything we've seen in nearly two centuries. Unsurprisingly, the plan has received virtually no international support. Aside from Hungary, no major European country endorsed it. Russia and China rejected it. In Latin America, Mexico, Brazil, and Chile refused to back it. Only Argentina, Paraguay, and possibly El Salvador—governments closely aligned with Washington—went along. No serious country supported it, and it's destined to fail. We'll see how Trump responds to a growing list of international failures, compounded by domestic discontent.

#Speaker 03

It's really causing great suffering across different sectors of the population. There's no industrial takeoff, as he had promised.

#Speaker 01

The U.S. economy isn't rebounding as promised. Inflation continues to hurt large segments of the population, and the industrial boom never materialized. It seems he's searching for some symbolic foreign policy victory. The spectacle surrounding Venezuela, including the attempted kidnapping of Maduro, was more Hollywood theater than strategy. It will lead nowhere, and eventually Maduro will have to be released, since no U.S. court will be able to convict him—an outcome that would deeply embarrass the Trump administration. So yes, Oscar, we're living in a very dangerous moment. History shows that in times like these, messianic and violent leaders can emerge—and that's precisely what the world does not need right now.

#Speaker 03

Because in moments like this, messianic, violent leaders can emerge—and that's not what we need right now.