



The Wilson Center Honors Senator Edward Kennedy's Contributions to Human Rights in Latin America

By Cynthia J. Arnson

Director, Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center

August 26, 2009

The Woodrow Wilson Center was privileged to have hosted Senator Ted Kennedy on several occasions and we join his family and the entire nation in mourning his passing. As noted by *Time* magazine in 2006, Senator Ted Kennedy “amassed a titanic record of legislation affecting the lives of virtually every man, woman and child in the country.” His contributions to civil rights, health care, and education policy are recognized across the nation, constituting only some of the areas in which he exercised unparalleled leadership.

At the Center we particularly have an appreciation for another, lesser-known aspect of his gigantic legacy: his path-breaking contributions to the defense of human rights in Latin America. Following the 1973 military coup in Chile, Kennedy led the Congress in speaking out against human rights violations and working for the release of junta's political prisoners. Between 1974 and 1976 he sponsored a series of amendments to the foreign aid bill that terminated military aid to General Augusto Pinochet and directed economic assistance to those most needy. He worked closely with the families of murdered Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and his young colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffit, following their assassination in 1976 on the streets of the nation's capital. The former head of Chile's secret police, the DINA, was subsequently convicted of masterminding the Letelier murder and other human rights crimes.

As military dictatorships broadened their hold over the countries of the Southern Cone, Kennedy continued his leadership on behalf of human rights. His name is recognized and revered among a whole generation of Latin Americans who were persecuted or forced into exile during the years of the dictatorships. Many of those individuals—OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza of Chile, Argentine ambassador to the United States Héctor Timerman, and Chilean ambassador to the United Nations Heraldo Muñoz—survived to now occupy senior positions in government and international institutions.

Throughout the Central American wars of the 1980s, Senator Kennedy continued to be a leading voice on human rights issues. He took an active role in support of the families of four U.S. churchwomen murdered in El Salvador in 1980, pressing the U.S. and Salvadoran governments to bring the killers to justice. Later in the decade, when six Jesuit priests and two Salvadoran women were murdered in cold blood on the campus of the Jesuit-run Central American University, Kennedy was among a handful of congressional leaders—among them former Massachusetts Congressman Joe Moakley—moving to tie U.S. military aid to a swift resolution of the case. The restrictions on military aid contributed to the pressures leading to a negotiated settlement of the Salvadoran war in 1992.

Senator Kennedy's voice and moral compass will be sorely missed.

Cynthia J. Arnson directs the Center's Latin American Program and worked as an aide in the U.S. Congress in the 1970s and '80s.

The [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](#) is the living, national memorial to President Wilson, established by Congress in 1968 and headquartered in Washington, D.C. The Center establishes and maintains a neutral forum for free, open, and informed dialogue. It is a nonpartisan institution, supported by public and private funds and engaged in the study of national and world affairs.

Conclusions or opinions expressed in Wilson Center Expert Sources belong to the individual experts themselves and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center's staff, fellows, trustees, advisory groups, or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to the Center.

To stop receiving alerts from Wilson Center Expert Sources, reply to this message with "unsubscribe" in the subject line.