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11 April 2013

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Latin American History

The Overthrow of Salvador Allende: A Political Necessity for Chile or an Economic Benefit for the United States?

Salvador Allende is renowned internationally due to his attempt to spread a nonviolent socialist agenda in Chile. Despite opposition from the American government, Allende led a successful campaign to become the first democratically elected Marxist president in Latin America. Between 1970 and 1973, the American government repeatedly executed covert operations in an effort to overthrow the Allende administration. Many wonder why Chile was focused on so heavily by the Nixon government. After all, Chile was nowhere near as vital to U.S. interests as the Mexican Gulf or the Panama Canal. Perhaps the most popular reason for American intervention in Chile lay in the fear that Salvador Allende represented a Communist threat to the globe and that his policies were contrary to U.S. economic and political interests.

In order to understand Allende's political agenda for Chile, one must first assess a short history of U.S. dominance in Chile. During the early 1900s and into the end of World War I, U.S. involvement in Chile's political affairs increased exponentially, as the U.S. became the largest superpower in the globe. American domination of Chile's profitable resources, especially copper, prevented Chile from attaining economic independence and growth. This prolonged subjugation of Chile resulted in disgruntled citizens who began to demand improved wages,

financial independence from imperialist policies, and a higher standard of living. The lower-class citizens urged on new leaders, and encouraged a government that would fight for proletariat rights.

Born in 1908, Salvador Allende was a revolutionary leader who pledged to improve conditions for the poorer classes. His political career began as he helped create the Partido Socialista of Chile at the age of thirty-five. Under allegiance to the Socialist and Communist parties (known as the Frente de Acción Popular when they worked together), Allende campaigned for the presidency of Chile six times between 1940 and 1960. His main platform featured bold programs against the local elite and the dominance of the United States. In 1970, he finally won the presidential seat and began to implement strategies for a smooth and democratic transition to socialism. Remarkably, he led a coalition government known as the Unidad Popular, which included officials from a wide variety of political ideologies, including Socialists, Communists, Social Democrats, and Radicals. During his early campaigns, the American government unleashed operations to prevent Allende from taking power and to escort him out once he had gained the presidency. This campaign, known within the CIA as Track I, was widely unsuccessful.

While in office, Allende's plan for integrating socialism into Chilean society involved three distinct goals: nationalizing U.S.-owned enterprises to increase public ownership of resources, redistributing wealth to the poorest classes of the population, and including workers in management and community planning. Upon receiving news of Allende's government agenda, Nixon approved plans for Track II, which centered on creating a chaotic environment that encouraged a military overthrow. The first action, including the nationalization of copper and the banking system, fueled American animosity. In retaliation for this decision, the United States

swiftly sought ways to strangle the Chilean economy. Richard Helms, Director of Central Intelligence, noted that President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser, yearned to "make the economy scream." The U.S. vetoed Chilean applications for loans from multinational institutions like the World Bank; more importantly, short-term credits from American commercial banks were withheld perpetually. Through these actions, the U.S. led Chile into a crippling credit blockade, forcing it to withdraw from its vital currency reserves. This credit blockade had far-flung and crucial effects: it raised the possibility among many middle-class Chileans that the administration would become entirely dependent on Soviet aid, and would consequently lead to a socialist dictatorship in Chile. Moreover, since financial scarcity had led to a decline in imports, widespread consumer dissatisfaction allowed the opposition parties to increase their base. After the first year of his presidency, Chile was plagued with a decline of investment and production and a rise of inflation. The middle class increasingly resented Allende's favoritism toward the proletariat and class conflict heightened. Now, the opposition could mobilize the unsatisfied citizens against the government.

It is important to note that not all American money was cut off, however. The lack of imports greatly affected Chilean public transportation, as many buses and trucks came from Ford and General Motors in the United States. In an effort to portray public dissent, truck owners and drivers organized large strikes, claiming that they did not have access to replaceable parts or tires. According to Peter Goldberg, author of *The Politics of the Allende Overthrow in Chile*, the Central Intelligence Agency secretly transferred about $8 million to the striking drivers and government opposition groups in order to "sustain the organized resistance to Allende." It is important to distinguish, however, that while the U.S. did not provide direct covert support to the strikers, they did provide funds to private sector groups which supported the strikers.

Nevertheless, the role of the U.S. government in stirring up chaos among the population is evident.

Another instance of mass protest came in December 1971, when middle- and upper-class housewives griped that the blockade made it difficult to obtain their everyday food supplies. Less than ten months later, the Confederation of Truck-Owner Operations led a twenty-six day strike against the government, joined by various other organizations of merchants and professionals.

During the months prior to the coup, the chaos and panic surrounding the civilians intensified. A series of acts of sabotage were committed against bridges, factories, radio transmitters, and on the homes of government officials and supporters. The violence certainly increased the worries and insecurities of many Chileans, as they began to feel that the administration could no longer provide basic security to its people. Adversaries of the presidential rulings initiated media campaigns condemning the government of "illegitimacy and totalitarian intentions."

Within the administration, pressure was placed on government loyalists to cut off their ties and affinity with Allende's leadership. While the head officers continued with the Chilean military tradition of supporting their constitutional president, some colonels collaborated on a covert plan to overthrow the government. In a New York Times article by Jonathan Kandell, "Chilean Officers Tell How They Began to Plan the Take-Over Last November", military officials cited several reasons for why they felt the need to overthrow Allende. "In the first two years, he has succeeded in destroying the economic power of the middle class, which is the base of our national institution", said one officer. Other generals asserted that motivation came from the Allende administration's attempt to "play on natural rivalries between the military branches

and prevent the formation of a common front." Indeed, the air force was sometimes favored by Allende's Defense Minister, as pilots were given larger pay increases and more equipment purchases than the armed forces sector. To spread fear and anger among the armed forces, the CIA covertly gave $1.5 million into Chile's largest and notably right-wing newspaper, El Mercurio. The U.S. government agents worked closely with the newspaper to spread anti-Allende propaganda, even going as far as suggesting that the Chilean left wing was planning on seizing control of the armed forces. The C.I.A. additionally sent operatives into the armed forces to warn them that American military financial assistance to Chile would be cut off if a coup was not enacted. Once the conspiracy among the generals was propelled, the conspirators ignored any possibility of negotiation with the government. In the word of one military official after the success of the coup, "we would have acted even if Allende had reached a compromise with the political opposition."

According to a New York Times article by Tad Szulc, "Bringing on Pinochet: The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende", the Nixon administration had manipulated the Chilean military generals to "assume that a coup against Allende was desirable." Thus, while the United States can credibly deny a direct role in the coup, they must inevitably share the blame for it. Szulc notes that the American federal government had applied immense economic pressure on the Chilean government in order to create a "political climate conducive to a coup." Nonetheless, there is much evidence that suggested the eventual overthrow of Allende without U.S. intervention, mainly due to his own policies and the disorder that had unleashed in Chile. The fundamental point persists that "American hands in Chile were not clean. "So secretive was the coup that a cable message transmitted from CIA headquarters to Chile explicitly warned that it was "imperative that these actions be implemented so secretly so that the United States

Government and American hand be well hidden." Furthermore, the CIA was ordered to carry out the plans for the coup without "coordination with the Department of State or Defense."

In a speech on December 4, 1972, Salvador Allende tried to defend his actions and blamed the United States for creating an environment of chaos and disruption. He charged that the U.S. tried to "cut [Chile] off from the world, strangle the economy, and deprive us of access to sources of international financing." He noted that this more subtle form of imperialism has prevented the Chilean nation from "exercising their rights as a sovereign nation."

His attempt to resolve the stalemate with his opposition was permanently crushed by the September 1973 coup led by Army General Augusto Pinochet. Quoted in a New York Times article "All the President Had to Do Was Ask: The C.I.A. Took Aim at Allende", Patrick Ryan, an American Lieutenant Colonel, called Chile's coup "close to perfect." By the early morning of September 11, the Army had shut down most television and radio stations in the capital city; despite warning that the armed forces had conspired against him, Allende remained convinced that only a small sector of the Navy was involved in the coup. According to most accounts, Allende committed suicide to avoid capture during the army's attack on the presidential palace, but others still uphold the idea that he was murdered. Regardless of Allende's form of death, Pinochet's forces took power, and quickly proceeded to imprison, torture, and assassinate loyalists to Allende. Pinochet's seventeen-year rule was marked by massive human rights violations and authoritarian rule.

The C.I.A. spent millions of dollars in the plans to undermine Allende and overthrow his presidency between November 1970 and September 1973. When the military seized power on September 11, 1973, the Nixon administration cheered for the success of three years of secret

operations, propaganda, and economic sabotage. It is pertinent to note that the American intervention in Chile was not the first time that the U.S. government has stepped into foreign affairs in governments that are not pleasing to them; in fact, Chile was not even the last country to be taken over by U.S. influence. History has strikingly reflected the tendency of the United States government to intervene in the political, economic, and social affairs in countless Latin American countries. Since 1945, the United States had attempted to overthrow fifty governments, many of them democracies. Interventions by the United States have occurred in most Latin American nations, including the Dominican Republic (1930), Guatemala (1982), Bolivia (1967), El Salvador (1980), Mexico (1917), Uruguay (1973), Ecuador (1961), and most recently in Cuba (1996). The reasons for all of these military interventions lie obviously with the security of the economic interests of the United States. The United States' banking interests, corporations, and governmental agencies share much of the blame (or the credit) for the coup of the Allende government; they indirectly pressured the Chilean military officials to overthrow their democratically-elected leader in favor of the U.S.-backed junta of Augusto Pinochet. With regards to other Latin American nations, the core reason is the same: the U.S. feared any government that threatened its status in world domination, and thus they acted upon the terror of losing important profits. According to a documentary by John Pilger, titled *War on Democracy*, the U.S. exhibits an "arrogance that says no country has the right to go its own way, unless that way coincides with the interest of the United States."

While most Chilean citizens view the regime of Pinochet with anger and disdain over the atrocities that his armed forces committed, the Wall Street stockbrokers and entrepreneurs would rather "praise Chile as their ideal of an open, capitalist economy" in a developing nation. Indeed, Chile's new government under Pinochet was everything that the United States wanted. In

establishing a free-market system, Pinochet swiftly moved to privatize public enterprises, weaken labor unions, and liberalizing trade. Nevertheless, the authoritarian leader's rule in Chile is seen by the American government as an economic miracle. The divided opinions over Pinochet's leadership are also evident in divided views on Allende. While some Chileans remember the economic crisis and social strife surrounding Allende's presidency, others still see him in a noble light, and honor his dedication to democracy and the rights of the working class.

In sum, Chileans generals felt the need to overthrow Salvador Allende's democratically elected government because the U.S. encouraged them to think it was necessary. Through years of masterfully-planned covert operations, the Nixon administration succeeded in the creation of panic and crisis in the Chilean political structure that heeded the call of a new government. Incidentally, the military generals had been pressured to act upon the wishes of the United States, and did so, at the cost of thousands of lost Chilean lives and the economic freedom of the nation.

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