

Western Oregon University

Digital Commons@WOU

---

Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)

Department of History

---

5-31-2005

## The Legacy of Salvador Allende

Kelly Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

---

# **The Legacy of Salvador Allende**

Kelly Peterson

5/31/05

HST ~~18~~ 352

Dr. Rector

## The Legacy of Salvador Allende

*“Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote: ‘His greatest virtue was following through, but fate could only grant him that rare and tragic greatness of dying in armed defense of the whole moth-eaten paraphernalia of an execrable system which he proposed abolishing without a shot’”<sup>1</sup>*

The legacy of Salvador Allende lives on in the hearts and minds of Chileans and the world. His ideas and messages captured the admiration and attention of the leading Latin American scholars, authors, poets, and politicians including the great, Gabriel Garcia Marquez as illustrated in the quote above. Allende’s methods, messages, and legacy will be examined.

Allende ruled in Chile for three short years, 1970-1973, before meeting his tragic end. From the beginning Salvador was immersed in politics. “Born in Valparaiso in 1908 into a professional family active in the Radical party, he had been active in politics since his student days, when as a medical student he entered into conspiracies against dictator Carlos Ibanez del Campo”<sup>2</sup>. Allende never left politics once he entered into the realm. He was very active in the socialist, Marxist, and communist parties of Chile. Before becoming president Salvador was a senator for 25 years. Because of his active participation in a variety of political parties, Allende became the candidate for the Left. “Precisely because of his acceptability to non-Marxist political faces, Allende was the only politician within the Socialist party who could reasonably expect to preside successfully over a relatively broad coalition of the Left”<sup>3</sup>. Allende was seen as almost

1: Marc Cooper, “Remembering Allende,” Nation 277 (2003):2.

2: Mark Falcoff, Modern Chile 1970-1989: A Critical History (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 44.

3: Falcoff, Modern Chile, 45.

too old to be running for President but because of his ability to communicate and represent with all of the different Leftist groups he became their candidate, his third attempt at the presidency, and won by a narrow margin in the 1970 election.

Many argue that because Allende received less than a majority of the vote his claim to the presidency was illegal. He received 36.2 percent of the vote while his opponents, Alessandri and Tomic, received 34.9 percent and 27.8 percent respectively. The fact of the matter is that “in three-way or four-way presidential contests, it was rare that one candidate would receive a majority”<sup>4</sup>. The lack of the majority vote then was nothing new and thus did not pull at the strength of the Allende government. However, something, make that someone, was not happy about the election results.

The situation in Chile was being watched by the Nixon administration and more specifically by Henry Kissinger. “Allende was not just another democratically elected president in Latin America. He was the first freely elected Marxist president in the Western Hemisphere who presented a model for peaceful social change, which the United States found ideologically unacceptable”<sup>5</sup>. The time period that Allende was elected in was one of considerable foreign tension for the United States. This was during the Cold War, Vietnam, and Cuba to name a few of the bigger headaches the U.S. was dealing with. The United States often views Latin America as their backyard and therefore they have the right to intervene and protect it if something or someone threatens the area. The U.S. saw communism and its spread as the biggest global threat at the time. It was like cancer that needed to be stopped. The cancer had now come to Chile.

4: John Rector, The History of Chile (Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 2003), 171.

5: Lois Hecht Oppenheim, Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 49.

Action had to be taken and it was, sort of. A plan was created to kidnap Army Chief Rene Schneider. This plan was first back and supported by the CIA but at the last minute Nixon sent the orders to pull out of the plan. The Chileans involved decided to go ahead with the kidnaping anyway. The kidnaping was botched and Schneider was murdered. Whether or not the message was received by the militants from the CIA in time to stop the attack left the CIA, Kissinger, and Nixon under scrutiny. Whether or not the CIA participated in this kidnaping gone bad is still debatable today. One thing was clear though; Nixon did not want Allende, touting Marxist beliefs, in the presidency. "Nixon's instructions to the CIA were simply to forestall Allende's inauguration; he was not interested in the details, or apparently in the kind of government that would emerge in Allende's place"<sup>6</sup>. Despite all of the plans and schemes to keep Allende from power he was confirmed as the winner of the presidential election and given the power of the presidency.

Allende had firm ideas for the direction of the country. "Salvador Allende explicitly stated that he intended to socialize Chile, not by force nor with sacrifices of other socialist nations, but with '*vino tinto and empanadas*,' red wine and turnovers"<sup>7</sup>. The Allende regime would not be one of violence, even in the end. A true reading of Karl Marx reveals that a violent overthrow is not a necessary step in the revolution of the proletariat. In fact, this revolution would come naturally without any force necessary. "A Marxist, Allende believed that it was the capitalist system itself that created and maintained poverty in the Third World because it was inherently exploitive of workers and peasants"<sup>8</sup>. Thus, things were about to change. This change would

6: Mark Falcoff, "Kissinger & Chile: The Myth that will not Die," Commentary 116 (2003): 4.

7: Rector, History of Chile, 172.

8: Oppenheim, Politics in Chile, 27.

occur in all sectors of society including and most heavily focused on the economy. One of the first actions taken by the President was to nationalize the copper mines owned by foreign powers including the United States. This did nothing to improve already hostile relations between Chile and the U.S. "It's [the Allende reform] principal economic objective, succinctly stated, was the abolition of the power of foreign and national monopoly capital and of large units of agricultural property, in order to initiate the construction of socialism"<sup>9</sup>. No matter what reforms were being made the underlying goal of every action was to promote the eventual flourish of socialism in Chile.

The first year of the Allende presidency was fairly successful and gave those who supported the president hope for a bright future. "UP [Popular Unity Party] officials devised an economic plan for the first year that was designed to win greater popular support by stimulating economic activity along with redistributing income toward the poorer sectors of society"<sup>10</sup>. The plan worked and a general prosperity was seen in the country. Unemployment was falling as wages were rising. Demand increased for goods and the economy looked as though it was in an upswing. And then the second year of Allende's presidency came.

The second year was no reflection of the first. The demand for goods was so high that soon staples such as sugar and bread were extremely scarce and the result was the creation of a black market. Strikes occurred in all branches of the economy. One of the most crippling was the strike of the trucking industry. The geography of Chile requires most all goods to be trucked up and down the country. With a strike there was almost a standstill of goods being transported

9: Falcoff, Modern Chile, 25.

10: Oppenheim, Politics in Chile, 56.

across the nation. In order to settle the dispute Allende brought in the military. “The fact that the political opposition believed military participation in the cabinet was necessary to end the strike and to guarantee fair congressional elections indicated the political weakness of the UP”<sup>11</sup>. The government was beginning to lose the support it once had among the people. This was just the beginning in the waning support for President Allende.

The economic downturn Chile faced during the second and third years of Allende’s regime was one of the primary reasons for loss of political support for the Popular Unity Party. However, there were other contributing factors. One was the split amongst the Leftist parties which resulted in a fragmented group of politicians are scrambling for the spotlight. Another factor was the role of the United States. Although economic and humanitarian aid slowed to a trickle, military aid increased from previous years. “The campaign to discredit the UP government and to create conditions for military intervention took place at a number of levels: at the institutional level, the mass level, and among selected political elites on the Right”<sup>12</sup>. The United States had their hand in stirring the political pot in Chile to hopefully gain enough support that would result in a coup. The fragmentation of political parties, the antics of the U.S. and the failing economy all had a part in creating the ripe conditions for a military coup.

One reason a military coup could be successful in Chile was because Allende had always advocated for nonviolent means of reform. “His [Allende] insistence on the use of democratic means to achieve power and radically reconstruct society was nether a mere tactic nor just a euphemism for minor and moderate reform”<sup>13</sup>. Allende was completely serious when he professed

11: Oppenheim, Politics in Chile, 71.

12: Ibid., 76.

13: Cooper, “Remembering Allende”, 2.

his belief in the democratic system in place and the power that it had to create change. One of the most important aspects of his belief system was that violence was not a necessary element for change and therefore would not be used. And it was not. “The criticism most frequently raised on the left about Allende was that he failed to ‘arm the workers’ and that he was too tolerant of an opposition that eventually overthrew him”<sup>14</sup>. True, the coup ended with the bloody death of Allende and his ideals but it can be observed that in order to preserve the purity of Allende’s beliefs nothing could have been done within the confines of democracy to prevent the coup.

The responsibility for the military coup held on September 11, 1973 has been placed on many groups. Who is actually responsible is still somewhat unclear. The role of the United States is the most disputed. On one side there is the argument that U.S. involvement is merely a myth. “The evidence of U.S. responsibility for Allende’s downfall is thin indeed, but the myth lives on, with unfortunate consequences”<sup>15</sup>. Those who hold this opinion typically also believe that Allende is on the whole undeserving of his spotlight. Many claim that the only reason Allende is even remembered is because of the brutality of the next dictator to come to power, Pinochet. “Pinochet and his associates played an unexpected role—rescuing for Allende and his government a place in Chilean history they did not earn and to which they could not otherwise have looked forward”<sup>16</sup>. On the opposite side of this stance is that the U.S. was involved in some way, if not directly then indirectly. “To claim that the United States was not actively involved in promoting Allende’s downfall in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary verges on incredulity”<sup>17</sup>.

14: Cooper, “Remembering Allende”, 3.

15: William Rogers, “Fleeing the Chilean Coup,” Foreign Affairs 83 (2004): 3.

16: Falcoff, “Kissinger & Chile,” 9.

17: Rogers, “Fleeing,” 4.



While others claim that even if the U.S. was involved in the coup that is not the reason for it. “The ‘real causes’ of the 1973 coup, he [Mark Falcoff] believes, are to be found not in Washington but in the devastating collapse of the Chilean economy that took place during the Allende presidency, as well as in Chile’s increasingly polarized political environment”<sup>18</sup>. There is obviously a wide array of opinions about the causes of the coup but one thing is for sure, “Allende’s bloody end was a harbinger of the violence that was to pervade Chile for the next sixteen years”<sup>19</sup>. The Allende reign was over after three short years. It ended with a military coup and the death of the President. Allende’s death however did not mean the end of his legacy in Latin America.

Salvador Allende was the first of many things in Chile. He was the first democratically elected Marxist president. He was the first to introduce the idea of working within a democracy to find socialism. And he was the first to believe that violence was not always the answer. Allende is celebrated to this day in Chile and throughout Latin America. Perhaps his reign as President was not an overwhelming success but he had an impact. He brought Marxism and socialism to the people of Chile and almost achieved success. “Anywhere the left is willing to be open, innovative, nondogmatic and imaginative..the figure of Salvador Allende and his self-sacrifice for the principles of social justice and democracy loom ever larger, more inspiring and more worthy of reverence and respect”<sup>20</sup>. Allende believed in his cause to the core of his being. He died for his beliefs. The strength he showed in his final hours remains in the hearts and minds of those he died for. This will remain his legacy.

18: “The Allende Affair,” Wilson Quarterly 28 (2004): 2.

19: Oppenheim, Politics in Chile, 83.

20: Cooper, “Remembering Allende,” 3.