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Reform, Revolution and Repression

The rise and fall of Salvador Allende

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Chile: Reform, Revolution and Repression

At the end of the 1950's Chile started a series of government reforms, both conservative and liberal. These reforms would lead to the election of Salvador Allende in 1970. Allende was the only Socialist in Latin America to be elected to office in a region dominated by political upheaval and military coups. In September 1973 that government was overthrown by a military coup. Though the coup may have been financed by the United States, the coup led in an era of violence and dictatorship that was as inhumane as any seen in the world.

In 1958 a coalition of right wing-parties elected Jorge Alessandri president¹, barely ahead of Salvador Allende. The only way the right wing parties could get their candidate elected was by forming coalitions amongst themselves so that all these parties supporting the same candidate. In the next several elections the left and the right tried to convince the middle to aid their candidate to get elected. This led to a stability of sorts in the Chilean democracy; where no one party controlled the government. Though it was stable, the government was in a position ripe for disaster.

After the term of Alessandri, the Christian Democrats got their candidate, Eduardo Frei, elected. Though he was elected with 56 percent of the vote, that number was misleading². He was only elected with a coalition of the right and radicals together. The two factions feared the election of the Socialist candidate, Salvador Allende.

Under Frei reforms in the government began to take place; along with the education reforms, rural development, agrarian reforms, and others including the copper industry³, which

¹Rector "History of Chile" pg. 155

ector "History of Chile" pg. 163

³Rector "History of Chile" pg. 164

was owned by the Kennecott and Anaconda corporations. Chile bought shares of each of the mines in Chile from these corporations. Though the government only bought shares of each mine this was seen as the "Chilenization" of Chile's copper industry.

Then in 1970 a coalition of the Communists, Radicals, Socialists and leftists threw their support behind one candidate, Salvador Allende⁴. In this election Allende defeated, to the shock of both Chileans and the international community, former president Jorge Alessandri and Radomiro Tomic. Alessandri was backed by the National Party and the independents, while Tomic ran under the Christian Democrats⁵. This election, Allende's third time running, was very close. Allende won by only 39,000 votes out of 3,000,000⁶. This has given cause to the saying that Allende did not win the election by a majority so he was not "democratically" elected.

When there is no clear winner by majority the Chilean constitution required that the congress decide the victor. During the debates Allende threatened to use the workers, who backed him, to shut down the country. And though Alessandri did everything in his power to block Allende and his rise to power, the Christian Democrats in congress threw their support to the front running candidate, Allende. When it became clear that Allende would win, the Christian Democrat candidate, Tomic, congratulated the new president on his victory.

It is here that the U.S. began to take a more active role in Chilean politics. When it became clear to Alessandri that Allende would raise to the presidency, he called upon all "Democratic forces to unite and block Allende. The U.S. began to discuss ways that would be feasible to block the newly elected president from taking office. In late 1970 President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger⁷, decided that an economic "war" must be waged

⁴Rector "History of Chile" pg. 170

⁵Rector "History of Chile" pg. 171

⁶Rector "History of Chile" pg. 171

..ornbluh "Chile, 9/11/73" pg. 1

on Chile in order to ruin the Socialist leader, Nixon ordered Kissinger to make the Chilean economy "Scream."⁸

In the next few years 6 million dollars would be funneled, by the U.S., to the opposition's press and parties.⁹ They then tried, but failed, to block Chile from restructuring its foreign debt. Washington then reduced its aid to Chile and then advised international financial institutions to reduce the lending to Chile.¹⁰ Allende responded to these actions by a complete takeover of the copper mines. The Anaconda and Kennecott asked to be reimbursed, after the debts of both companies, past and then present, were calculated by economists hired from France and the Soviet Union.¹¹ It was determined that Chile did not owe the copper companies any money, but in fact that those companies owe Chile over 300 million dollars.¹²

These Copper companies, not satisfied by these findings, would tie up the Chilean export activities in international courts for years to come, thus blocking an important part of Chile's export revenues. In addition to this Allende followed through on his campaign promise to workers to raise wages by a 35 to 40 percent.¹³ This raise in wages caused a Rush by the Chileans to buy whatever they could get their hands on and by 1973 the country was floundering in debt and mired in inflation. This set the scene for the downfall of Allende.

In 1970 before Allende actually took the office of president, the head of the Chilean armed forces, René Schneider was assassinated. The details of this act are sketchy even after the declassification of the CIA's files concerning Chile by the Clinton administration in 2000.¹⁴ From

⁸Kornbluh "Chile, 9/11/73" pg. 1

⁹Rogers "Fleeing the Chilean Coup" pg. 2, Sigmund "The Overthrow of Allende" pg. 156

¹⁰Rogers "Fleeing the Chilean Coup" pg. 2

¹¹Sigmund "The Overthrow of Allende" pg. 153

¹²Sigmund "The Overthrow of Allende" pg. 154

ector "The History of Chile" pg. 173

¹⁴Kornbluh "Opening up the Files: Chile Declassified" pg. 5

what we know, on the morning of 22 October 1970 the general was shot when, during a kidnapping attempt, he drew his revolver on eight attackers. What is unclear is whether or not the CIA was involved in any way in this act. Senate Select Committee investigators were told that the relevant documents about the assassination were missing from DOD files.¹⁵

The significance of General Schneider's death was far reaching. The general had opposed any military coup in the Chilean government. He was a stout constitutionalist who was a major obstacle to those willing to commit violent acts to overthrow Allende. In the wake of his assassination General Carlos Prats, became head of the armed forces. In August of 1973, in response to the economic crisis, strikes by workers, and a failed coup attempt by officers under his command,¹⁶ General Prats submitted his resignation.

From there General Augusto Pinochet rose to take command of the armed forces. At first Pinochet seemed, to the army officers involved in planning the coup, to be opposed to the plot.¹⁷ There was debate amongst the officers about Pinochet's trustworthiness, after all he had been appointed by Allende himself.¹⁸ It was only when Pinochet himself approached the conspirators about a military intervention, if necessary, did they begin to believe he was trustworthy.¹⁹ Then 36 hours before the coup was to begin, Pinochet's involvement was sealed when he signed a paper

¹⁵Sigmund "The Overthrow of Allende" pg. 121-123

¹⁶Verdugo "Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death" pg. 2, Coup was called the "Tanquetazo" coup because of the tanks used in the attempt.

¹⁷Verdugo "Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death" pg. 3

¹⁸Verdugo "Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death" pg. 3

¹⁹Verdugo "Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death" pg. 3, A right wing opponent of Allende, Federico Willoughby Macdonald, gave the following explanation as to why the conspirators decided to trust Pinochet; "There is an aspect of General Pinochet that could make him appear to be a traitor, in the sense that he is a man who quickly changes from one position to another. My explanation, given what I know, is that he is 100 percent a military man, a man who went into the army when he was 15. He's been in the institution almost 60 years, and he had to stay in the army to advance and be promoted. He must comply with the currents of the times, following prevailing opinions, cause a person who doesn't operate that way is out, expelled by the system. Therefore, if it's necessary to be a Catholic, he is a Catholic; it's necessary to be a Mason., he is a Mason; if it is necessary to salute the politicians, he salutes the politicians- if it's Fidel Castro, he salutes Fidel Castro."

agreeing to the coup.²⁰

Early on September 11, 1973 the Chilean Armed forces marched on the capital and assumed control. Allende was offered a plane to Europe²¹ but he refused. Then later that day the Air Force bombed the national palace and Allende ended up dead. Rumors about the CIA involvement in the coup began then and there. Some people believed that it was U.S. operatives that flew the planes that bombed the Palace, others believe that the CIA engineered the plot completely and the Chilean military leaders were just along for the ride.

What we do know is that the U.S., under President Nixon, waged an economic war on Chile in an effort to destabilize the country and end Socialist rule. Some 6 million U.S. dollars was spent, by order of Henry Kissinger, funding the peaceful opposition to Allende's rule; newspapers and political parties received support. This was done despite Allende's desire to maintain good relations with the United States.²² From this economic war, Chile's economy quickly spiraled out of control. The causes were not all the United States' fault though; poor economic practices by Allende himself caused inflation to rise. Also the Chilean copper industry was ground to a halt due to the government's refusal to pay reparations to the Anaconda and Kennecott companies. By 1973 the situation was one of strike and strife in Chile. What happened next is the only disputed point. Whether or not the United States funded Pinochet or not is unclear; the only thing that is certain is that the United States stood idly by for the next 17 years while Pinochet presided over an oppressive government. Thousands of Chileans were killed and multiple Americans disappeared.²³ Human rights violations by a government, supported by U.S. policies, which only came to light recently, bringing into question all the U.S.'s actions in recent time in nations such

²⁰Verdugo "Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death" pg. 6

²¹Rector, "The History of Chile" pg. 182

²²Sigmund "The Overthrow of Allende" pg. 128

Kornbluh "Chile, 9/11/73"

as Panama, Somalia, Kuwait, and Iraq. If we are to assume the role of world protector than we must enforce the same standards in every case.

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