September 11, 1973: The Chile Coup: The U.S. Hand

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Since 1970, the Nixon administration had worked to de-stabilize the elected government of Socialist Salvador Allende. The CIA had laid the ground work for the coup d'etat. In view of Pinochet's recent arrest, the following article looks back a quarter century at the U.S. role in the political violence that shook Chile.

Twenty-five years ago, tanks rumbled through the streets of Chile, terrified civilians were lined up before firing squads at the National Stadium, the elected president was dead.

Yet, at Richard Nixon's White House, the events were a cause for celebration, a culmination of three years of covert operations, propaganda and economic sabotage.

Newly declassified U.S. government records put Washington's role in the Chilean coup in sharper focus than ever before. The papers also shed light on corners of the story that previously had been suspected, but not proven.

The documents describe how an angry Nixon demanded a coup, if necessary, to block the inauguration of Marxist Salvador Allende following his victory in the 1970 Chilean elections.

The documents reveal that an early coup plan — known as "Track II" — continued through the assassination of pro-constitutional Chilean Gen. Rene Schneider, who was gunned down by military plotters on Oct. 22, 1970. The fuller documentary record contradicts the long-standing claim by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that "Track II" was shut down a week before Schneider's murder.

After Allende's inauguration, Nixon did not give up. The documents detail what his administration did to make the Chilean economy "scream," how the CIA spread "black" propaganda, and how Washington finally goaded the Chilean army into the coup of 1973.

The Chilean coup leader, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, held power for the next 17 years, relinquishing control in 1990 only after arranging immunity for himself and his top generals.

Until Oct. 16, Pinochet had escaped all punishment for his actions which left thousands dead and Chile a bitterly divided nation.

Yet, at the start of the Chilean tragedy almost three decades ago, the U.S. government wasn't even sure that Chile was important to American national interests.

Except for some multi-national corporations which had mining and other business interests, the sliver of a country embedded between the towering Andes and the Pacific Ocean was barely known to most Americans. But the CIA began alerting Washington to the rise of Allende's leftist Popular Unity coalition in 1968. By 1970, the CIA warned that Allende was poised to win the largest bloc of votes in Chile's national election.

At the time, the Vietnam War was President Nixon's biggest headache. Chile was more a nuisance, although Nixon feared Allende's victory might erode the image of U.S. strength.

On March 25, June 27 and Aug. 7, 1970, then-national security advisor Kissinger chaired meetings of the "40 Committee," a high-level inter-agency group. The committee ordered covert operations to "denigrate Allende and his Popular Unity coalition," according to one historical CIA summary.

But the State Department questioned the alarmist fears. State reported to the White House on Aug. 18, 1970, that "we identify no vital U.S. national interests within Chile."

In a 23-page report, State added that Allende's election did not even present a unique set of problems:

> "In examining the potential threat posed by Allende, it is important to bear in mind that some of the problems foreseen for the United States in the event of his election are likely to arise no matter who becomes Chile's next president."

Nevertheless, the U.S. ambassador to Chile and other senior Nixon officials saw a regional crisis — and a blow to Washington's international prestige — if an avowed Marxist won a fair presidential election in South America.

Ambassador Edward Korry began sending frantic, minute-by-minute commentaries about the last days of Chile's 1970 campaign. Korry's cables became known inside the State Department as "Korrygrams" because of their unusual language and undiplomatic opinions.

On election day, Korry sent no fewer than 18 updates. He reported that he could hear "the mounting roar of Allendistas acclaiming their victory" from the streets. Korry wrote: "We have suffered a grievous defeat."

The next three weeks, Korry flooded Washington with lurid reports alleging a communist takeover. In one cable, he announced that "there is a graveyard smell to Chile, the fumes of a democracy in decomposition. They stank in my nostrils in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and they are no less sickening here today."

Allende's victory also sent Nixon into a rage and started the president's men plotting how to stop Allende's inauguration. Cables focused on a scheme to derail formal ratification of

Allende's victory by Chile's congress on Oct. 24, 1970.

According to one idea, the congress would defy the electorate and pick the runner-up, Jorge Alessandri, "who would renounce the presidency and thus provoke new elections in which [outgoing president Eduardo] Frei would run."

On Sept. 12, Korry and Assistant Secretary of State John Richardson met secretly with Frei at the presidential palace. While much of the conversation remains classified, Korry reported that Frei saw only a "one in 20 chance" to stop Allende, but added that he could not "afford to be anything but the president of all Chileans at this time."

Despite the odds, Nixon ordered the CIA to try. The covert action to reverse the results of the Chilean election — by political or military means — took the code name, "Project FUBELT."

On Sept. 16, CIA director Richard Helms informed his senior covert action staff that "President Nixon had decided that an Allende regime in Chile was not acceptable to the United States," according to one declassified CIA memo.

"The President asked the Agency to prevent Allende from coming to power or to unseat him," Helms added. The CIA had 48 hours to present an action plan to Kissinger.

Soon, the CIA was pressuring Frei. "CIA mobilized an interlocking political action and propaganda campaign designed both to goad and entice Frei" into the "so-called Frei re-election gambit," according to a declassified "Report on CIA Chilean Task Force Activities." The scheme had "only one purpose," Helms told the NSC: "to induce President Frei to prevent Allende's [formal] election by the congress on 24 October, and, failing that, to support — by benevolent neutrality at the least and conspiratorial benediction at the most – – a military coup which would prevent Allende from taking office." The election gambit was known as Track I.

The back-up plan for a military coup was called Track II. The CIA inducements to Frei included offering substantial sums of money to his "re-election" campaign, bribing other Christian Democrats outright, and orchestrating visits and calls from respected leaders abroad.

To influence Frei through his wife, the CIA instigated the wiring of telegrams to Mrs. Frei from women's groups in other Latin American nations.

Other mailings to Frei included CIA-planted news articles from around the world about Chile's peril. The articles were part of a covert "black" propaganda campaign which, the CIA boasted, resulted in at least 726 stories, broadcasts and editorials against an Allende presidency. Despite these labors, the Frei "re-election gambit" failed, as Frei refused to have the Christian Democrats block Allende's ratification.

> "Frei did manage to confide to several top-ranking military officers that he would not oppose a coup, with a guarded implication he might even welcome one," Helms reported to Kissinger.

But "Frei moved quickly away from" the incipient putsch when right-wing coup plotters assassinated Gen. Schneider on Oct. 22, 1970, one CIA cable said. Schneider had insisted

that the military accept the will of the people and respect the Chilean constitution.

U.S. complicity in Schneider's murder has long been a touchy point for senior Nixon administration officials.

Kissinger went to great lengths to distance himself from the assassination, both in testimony to Congress and in his memoirs. Kissinger claimed that CIA coup plotting was "turned off" at a meeting on Oct. 15 — a week before Schneider was murdered.

CIA deputy director of plans Thomas "Karamessines carried from his Oct. 15 meeting with me an instruction to turn off General [Roberto] Viaux's coup plot and a general mandate to 'preserve our assets' in Chile in the (clearly remote) chance that some other opportunity might develop," Kissinger wrote in the White House Years.

But a declassified "top secret" memorandum of that Oct. 15 meeting undercuts Kissinger's account. At the meeting with Karamessines and Gen. Alexander Haig, Kissinger was quoted as demanding "that the Agency should continue keeping the pressure on every Allende weak spot in sight — now and into the future until such time as new marching orders are given."

Kissinger also demanded tight secrecy around the coup plotting. "Dr. Kissinger discussed his desire that the word of our encouragement to the Chilean military in recent weeks be kept as secret as possible, "the memo said:

> "Mr. Karamessines stated emphatically that we had been doing everything possible in this connection, including the use of false flag officers, car meetings, and every conceivable precaution."

The next day, a secret "eyes only" cable from CIA headquarters to Henry Hecksher, CIA station chief in Santiago, revealed that Kissinger's marching orders were relayed to the field.

> "It is firm and continuing policy that Allende be overthrown by a coup … prior to October 24," the cable read. "But efforts in this regard will continue vigorously beyond this date. We are to continue to generate maximum pressure toward this end utilizing every appropriate resource. It is imperative that these actions be implemented clandestinely and securely so that the USG [U.S. government] and American hand be well hidden," the cable continued. "Please review all your present and possibly new activities to include propaganda, black operations, surfacing of intelligence or disinformation, personal contacts, or anything else your imagination can conjure which will permit you to continue to press forward toward our [deleted] objective."

While undercutting Kissinger, the records back the 1975 testimony of the CIA's Karamessines. He told a congressional investigation that "Track II was never really ended. What we were told to do was to continue our efforts. Stay alert, and do what we could to contribute to the eventual achievement of the objectives and purposes of Track II."

After Allende's inauguration on Nov. 3, the CIA continued working toward a military coup.

The geo-political rationale was outlined in a CIA postmortem dated Nov. 12, 1970. It noted that "Dr. Salvador Allende became the first democratically-elected Marxist head of state in the history of Latin America — despite the opposition of the U.S. Government. As a result,

U.S. prestige and interests are being affected materially at a time when the U.S. can ill afford problems in an area that has been traditionally accepted as the U.S. 'backyard'."

The highlights of "Project FUBELT" were cited in both the newly released CIA documents and in papers uncovered by the 1975 congressional inquiry.

Covert funds were funneled into Chilean congressional campaigns; CIA agents stayed close to disgruntled Chilean military officers; to keep the military on edge, the CIA planted false propaganda suggesting that the Chilean left planned to take control of the armed forces; and the CIA secretly poured $1.5 million into one of Chile's leading newspapers, El Mercurio.

But the CIA covert operation was only one leg of what U.S. officials called "a triad" of actions toward Chile, according to National Security Decision Memorandum 93. A second leg was "correct but cool" diplomatic pressure and a third leg was the "invisible blockade" of loans and credits to Chile.

For years, historians have debated if such a blockade existed, or whether Allende's socialist economic policies led to the loss of economic credit. But the new NSC records show conclusively that the Nixon administration moved quickly and quietly to shut down multilateral and bilateral foreign aid to Chile.

At the Inter-American Development Bank, the NSC simply informed the U.S. representative that he did not have authority to vote for loans to Chile.

A secret report — prepared for Kissinger several weeks after Allende's inauguration — said, "the U.S. Executive Director of the Inter-American Development Bank understands that he will remain uninstructed until further notice on pending loans to Chile. As an affirmative vote by the U.S. is required for loan approval, this will effectively bar approval of the loans."

At the World Bank, U.S. officials worked behind the scenes to ensure that Chile would be disqualified for a pending $21 million livestock improvement credit as well as future loans. In addition, the president of the Export-Import Bank agreed to "cooperate fully" with Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Charles Meyer on the discontinuation of new credits and guarantees to Chile.

The Nixon administration also moved to isolate Allende's government diplomatically around the world. Secret strategy papers were drawn up by an inter-agency working group in early December 1970. The papers reported on "USG consultation with selected Latin American governments … to promote their sharing of our concern over Chile."

The mix of economic sabotage, political propaganda and army prodding worked. Allende found himself confronted by growing disorder and soaring inflation. At every turn, his policies encountered well-funded adversaries.

On Sept. 11, 1973, amid the mounting chaos, Chile's military struck. In a classic coup d'etat, the army seized control of strategic sites throughout the country and cornered Allende in his presidential offices. He died in a fire-fight, apparently shooting himself in the head to avoid capture. \

Nixon officials were ecstatic over the coup. "Chile's coup de etat was close to perfect," stated a "SitRep"– situation report — from the U.S. military group in Valparaiso. The report,

written by Marine Lt. Col. Patrick Ryan, characterized Sept. 11, 1973, as Chile's "day of destiny" and "Our D-Day."

CIA records detailing clandestine operations after the coup remain highly classified. But the "40 Committee," chaired by Kissinger, immediately authorized the CIA to "assist the junta in gaining a more positive image, both at home and abroad," according to documents previously revealed by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

As part of those efforts, the CIA helped the junta write a "white book" justifying the coup. The CIA financed advisors who helped the military prepare a new economic plan for the country. The CIA paid for military spokesmen to travel around the world to promote the new regime. And, the CIA used its own media assets to cast the junta in a positive light.

The reality in Chile was far different, as the U.S. government knew. Only 19 days after the coup, a secret briefing paper prepared for Kissinger — entitled "Chilean Executions" — put the "total dead" from the coup at 1,500. The paper reported that the junta had summarily executed 320 individuals — three times more than publicly acknowledged.

Despite the carnage, U.S. officials described the scene with soaring rhetoric. "Now that they are in fact again a 'country in liberty' no obstacle is too high, no problem too difficult to solve," stated the Navy section of the U.S. military group in a situation report on Oct. 1, 1973. "Their progress may be slow, but it will be as free men aspiring to goals which are for the benefit of Chile."

To help, Nixon opened the spigot of economic aid. Three weeks after the coup, the Nixon administration authorized $24 million in commodity credits to buy wheat — credits that had been denied to Allende's government. The United States provided a second $24 million in commodity credits to Chile for feed corn, and planned to transfer two destroyers to the Chilean navy. The aid flowed, although Assistant Secretary of State Jack Kubisch reported to Kissinger that junta leader Pinochet had ruled out "any time table for turning Chile back to the civilians." Chile's record as South America's pre-eminent democracy was coming to an end.

But even the CIA's best propaganda could not hide the reality on the ground. The coup's brutality was drawing worldwide condemnation and prompting worries at the White House. "Internationally, the Junta's repressive image continues to plague it," stated a Kissinger briefing paper on Nov. 16, 1973. Reports of mass arrests — by then, U.S. intelligence put the number at 13,500 — as well as summary executions, torture and "disappearances" were reaching the world press.

The administration fretted about an image problem in the United States, too, because two Americans — Charles Horman and Frank Terruggi — were among those executed at the National Stadium. Their deaths constituted a "difficult public relations situation," one cable reported on Oct. 21, 1973.

The Kubisch report to Kissinger cited "heavy" media criticism and congressional inquiries on the two executions. In February 1974, Kubisch delicately raised the American deaths with Chilean Foreign Minister Manuel Huerta, according to a newly declassified memorandum of the conversation. The topic was broached "in the context of the need to be careful to keep relatively small issues in our relationship from making our cooperation more difficult," the memo said. But the first wave of executions was only the start of atrocities in Pinochet's

Chile. Human rights violations kept complicating U.S.-Chilean relations, especially after Nixon's Watergate resignation in August 1974.

By 1975, human rights advocates were challenging the Ford administration's continued support for Pinochet. A confidential NSC memorandum dated July 1, 1975, revealed a mutiny even inside the U.S. Embassy.

"A number of officers in the Embassy at Santiago have written a dissent," according to the memo prepared for national security advisor Brent Scowcroft. The dissent was "strongly supported by the Policy Planning office in ARA [State's Latin American division], calling for cutting off all economic and military assistance to Chile until the human rights situation improved."

The memo said the embassy staff was overruled by then-Ambassador David Popper who wanted to continue support for the junta while making stronger protests on human rights. Popper met with the Chilean minister of economic coordination, Raul Saez, on April 6, 1975, to discuss the concerns. Popper said "the most difficult problem we had in our embassy had to do with allegations of torture," according to an embassy cable. "The root of the problem seemed to me to be the absolute power of DINA [Chile's intelligence service] to do whatever it desired in detaining and handling suspects."

Saez replied that "he had remonstrated with Pinochet about DINA, so far without much success . The minister then blamed "fascist advisors to the junta" for the atrocities. But the declassified documents portrayed DINA as anything but a rogue agency. Rather, it was an intelligence service which served at Pinochet's personal command.

On April 15, 1975, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported that since the decree "establishing DINA as the national intelligence arm of the government, Colonel [Manuel] Contreras has reported exclusively to, and received orders only from, President Pinochet."

By summer 1975, human rights abuses forced the Ford administration to edge back from the Chilean junta. Pinochet requested a visit with President Ford in August, but White House officials feared the meeting "would stimulate criticism domestically in the United States and from Latin America." The NSC instructed Popper to "discourage it by saying that the President's schedule was already full."

In 1976, U.S.-Chilean relations received another jolt when DINA agents traveled to Washington and exploded a bomb under a car carrying former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and two Americans. Letelier and one of the Americans, Ronni Moffitt, died.

A federal investigation traced the bombing back to DINA and some Cuban-American accomplices. A Senate investigation linked the Letelier bombing to a program of cross-border assassinations known as Operation Condor. That operation had attacked Pinochet critics in Spain, Italy and Argentina as well as the United States.

But Pinochet and his coup makers would avoid prosecution at least in Chile. Before gradually returning the reins of government to civilians in 1990, Pinochet engineered an amnesty for himself and his senior officers. Only DINA chief Contreras was sentenced to seven years in prison, for his role in the Letelier bombing. In his defense, Contreras insisted that he was just following Pinochet's orders.

While the newly released documents answer some mysteries about the covert U.S. policy

toward Chile, other questions await additional declassifications. Still-secret records could clarify Pinochet's responsibility for Operation Condor as well as the CIA's knowledge about the state-sponsored terrorism and the CIA relationship with the DINA.

Many of the secrets are — or soon will be — more than 25 years old. At that age, they fall under President Clinton's 1995 Executive Order mandating full declassification of national security secrets with few exceptions. The secrets also could clarify who's to blame for deaths of foreign nationals, the case now under way in Spain.

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