

# Chile

Although Kissinger once dismissed Chile as “a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica,” that South American nation attracted his rapt attention as a threat to U.S. hegemony in September 1970.<sup>80</sup> That month Chileans elected as their president Salvador Allende, an unabashed Marxist, a physician by profession, and a founder of Chile’s Socialist party. The CIA had sent hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribe and propaganda money to Chile to thwart his electoral victory. The CIA also cooperated with the International Telephone and Telegraph Company’s covert effort to back a right-wing candidate. “I don’t see why we have to let a country go Marxist just because its people are irresponsible,” Kissinger said at the time.<sup>81</sup> Having failed to prevent Allende’s election, Nixon ordered the CIA to stimulate a military coup before the Chilean Congress confirmed Allende’s triumph. When that tactic also failed, the CIA initiated an elaborate project to undermine the Allende government. Following presidential advice to “make the economy scream” in Chile in order to unsettle Allende’s policies, which included the nationalization of American-owned copper corporations (Kennecott and Anaconda), the CIA worked with U.S. companies to block credit and the shipment of spare parts.<sup>82</sup> Washington cut off economic aid and denied Export-Import Bank loans to Chile. Military assistance continued as the CIA conspired with Chilean army officers and also spent \$6 million to subsidize newspapers and political parties opposed to Allende. Allende criticized U.S. pressure—“an always oblique attack, covert, sinuous, but nonetheless harmful for Chile.”<sup>83</sup>

In 1973 a military junta overthrew Allende. In the chaos, military officers murdered him, or he committed suicide. Most scholarly accounts and a Senate intelligence committee report conclude that U.S. complicity stopped short of direct participation in the coup. “U.S. authorities did not create the factors” that overthrew the government, Allende’s foreign minister has written, “but rather increased and intensified the impact of those factors.”<sup>84</sup> Most Americans remember Allende’s ouster from watching the 1982 film *Missing*, starring Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek, a taut thriller in which Chilean authorities kill an American journalist fin-



**Frank Church (1924–1984).** Graduate of Stanford University and Democratic senator from Idaho (1957–1981), Church became a major figure on the Foreign Relations Committee, serving as its chair, 1979–1981. A critic of the Vietnam War and a great orator, Church also headed a special Senate committee that revealed U.S. complicity in the overthrow of Chile’s elected president Salvador Allende. (Frank Church Collection, Boise State University Library)

gered by the U.S. Embassy because he detected U.S. machinations. Although Ambassador Nathaniel Davis subsequently refuted the main thesis of the film, it still reinforced the culpability many Americans felt about meddling in the internal politics of a sovereign state and about the many Chileans who lost their lives under the junta's iron-fisted tyranny. The new government returned companies to private hands, suspended freedom of speech and press, jailed dissenters, and gained notoriety for torturing and killing political opponents.

The Nixon and Ford administrations also sought to keep Cuba isolated. Under Fidel Castro, Cuba had become a communist state and close Soviet ally. "There'll be no change toward that bastard while I'm President," snapped Nixon.<sup>85</sup> In fall of 1970, after the election of Allende, a friend of Castro's, Nixon concluded from sketchy U-2 evidence that the Soviets were building a nuclear submarine base at Cienfuegos, Cuba, in violation of their understanding after the 1962 missile crisis to refrain from placing offensive weapons on the island (see Chapter 9). The president and Kissinger decided "to face the Soviets down."<sup>86</sup> Moscow assured Washington that the Soviets were not building a naval facility. The crisis quickly passed, but the Nixon administration claimed a victory that "reaffirmed," "clarified," and "amplified" the 1962 understanding by prohibiting Soviet nuclear submarine facilities in Cuba.<sup>87</sup> In mid-1971, swine fever swept Cuba, causing health authorities to slaughter half a million pigs to prevent further spread of the disease. Although Cubans suspected sabotage of a major food source, not until 1977 did U.S. investigative journalists reveal that the CIA and an exile group had introduced the deadly virus into Cuba—another CIA dirty trick. Still seeking some accommodation with North America in the early 1970s, Castro deemphasized the export of revolution and aid to insurgencies, and in 1973 he signed an antihijacking treaty with the United States to discourage terrorism on the airways. Two years later the Organization of American States lifted its economic blockade of Cuba. During 1974–1975, U.S. officials met secretly with Cuban diplomats to explore possibilities for détente. But these positive steps ended when Cuban troops in Africa helped Angolan radicals come to power.

Until the mid-1970s, Africa stood low on the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger list of diplomatic priorities. Administration policy sought to expand U.S. material interests, strengthen ties with white minority regimes in Portuguese Angola, Rhodesia, and South Africa, and yet encourage progress toward racial harmony. The National Security Council explained in a memorandum (NSSM 39) that "the whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come about is through them."<sup>88</sup> Washington calculated that the black majorities feared white military superiority and would therefore refrain from major violent confrontation. In February 1970, Nixon told Kissinger, then preparing a presidential message to Congress on foreign policy, to "make sure there's something in it for the jigs, Henry."<sup>89</sup> This crude, condescending remark about black Africans reflected the attitude underlying U.S. policy. Washington relaxed the arms embargo to white South Africa; Congress in 1971 passed the Byrd Amendment permitting the United States to buy chromium from Rhodesia despite a United Nations-declared economic boycott of Ian Smith's white minority government. Although the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus resigned from the U.S. delegation to the United Nations because of the "stifling hypocrisy" of Nixon's policy toward Africa, CIA director Richard

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**Richard Nixon's death generated much fanfare. Henry Kissinger said in his eulogy: "The world is a better place, a safer place, because of Richard Nixon." I'm sure he was thinking of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. But let's focus on one place that wasn't mentioned in all the media hoopla -- Chile -- and see how it's a "better, safer place." In early September 1970, Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile in a democratic election. What were his politics?**

He was basically a social democrat, very much of the European type. He was calling for minor redistribution of wealth, to help the poor. (Chile was a very inegalitarian society.) Allende was a doctor, and one of the things he did was to institute a free milk program for half a million very poor, malnourished children. He called for nationalization of major industries like copper mining, and for a policy of international independence -- meaning that Chile wouldn't simply subordinate itself to the US, but would take more of an independent path.

**Was the election he won free and democratic?**

Not entirely, because there were major efforts to disrupt it, mainly by the US. It wasn't the first time the US had done that. For example, our government intervened massively to prevent Allende from winning the preceding election, in 1964. In fact, when the Church Committee investigated years later, they discovered that the US spent more money per capita to get the candidate it favored elected in Chile in 1964 than was spent by both candidates (Johnson and Goldwater) in the 1964 election in the US!

Similar measures were undertaken in 1970 to try to prevent a free and democratic election. There was a huge amount of black propaganda about how if Allende won, mothers would be sending their children off to Russia to become slaves -- stuff like that. The US also threatened to destroy the economy, which it could -- and did -- do.

**Nevertheless, Allende won. A few days after his victory, Nixon called in CIA Director Richard Helms, Kissinger and others for a meeting on Chile. Can you describe what happened?**

As Helms reported in his notes, there were two points of view. The "soft line" was, in Nixon's words, to "make the economy scream." The "hard line" was simply to aim for a military coup.

Our ambassador to Chile, Edward Korry, who was a Kennedy liberal type, was given the job of implementing the "soft line." Here's how he described his task: "to do all within our power to condemn Chile and the Chileans to utmost deprivation and poverty." That was the soft line.

**There was a massive destabilization and disinformation campaign. The CIA planted stories in *El Mercurio* [Chile's most prominent paper] and fomented labor unrest and strikes.**

They really pulled out the stops on this one. Later, when the military coup finally came [in September, 1973] and the government was overthrown -- and thousands of people were being imprisoned, tortured and slaughtered -- the economic aid which had been cancelled immediately began to flow again. As a reward for the military junta's achievement in reversing Chilean democracy, the US gave massive support to the new government.

Our ambassador to Chile brought up the question of torture to Kissinger. Kissinger rebuked him sharply -- saying something like, Don't give me any of those political science lectures. We don't care about torture -- we care about important things. Then he explained what the important things were.

Kissinger said he was concerned that the success of social democracy in Chile would be contagious. It would infect southern Europe -- southern Italy, for example -- and would lead to the possible success of what was then called Eurocommunism (meaning that Communist parties would hook up with social democratic parties in a united front).

Actually, the Kremlin was just as much opposed to Eurocommunism as Kissinger was, but this gives you a very clear picture of what the domino theory is all about. Even Kissinger, mad as he is, didn't believe that Chilean armies were going to descend on Rome. It wasn't going to be that kind of an influence. He was worried that successful economic development, where the economy produces benefits for the general population -- not just profits for private corporations -- would have a contagious effect.

In those comments, Kissinger revealed the basic story of US foreign policy for decades.

**You see that pattern repeating itself in Nicaragua in the 1980s.**

Everywhere. The same was true in Vietnam, in Cuba, in Guatemala, in Greece. That's always the worry -- the threat of a good example.

**Kissinger also said, again speaking about Chile, "I don't see why we should have to stand by and let a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."**

As the *Economist* put it, we should make sure that policy is insulated from politics. If people are irresponsible, they should just be cut out of the system.