

Allende Against Empire

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U.S. foreign policy in Latin America became defined by unilateral intervention during the Cold War. This first manifested with the 1954, CIA-organized coup ousting the democratically-elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz, which radicalized many Latin Americans. Deeply affected was Salvador Allende, a leftist Chilean senator who began to place opposition to U.S. foreign policy at the center of his politics. Allende never strayed from the democratic process in pursuing his leftist ideals, but like Árbenz, he would be faced with U.S. interventionism.

In 1964, when Allende, head of a leftist, four-party coalition, ran for president of Chile, the U.S. sent 100 advisors to support his opponent, Eduardo Frei, while the CIA underwrote more than half of Frei's campaign costs. Frei won, but six years later, Allende ran again, with the Unidad Popular coalition, prompting Henry Kissinger to quip to a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people." At this meeting, \$300,000 was allocated to an anti-Allende campaign. Still, Allende won a plurality in an election internationally deemed legitimate. Per Chilean electoral rules, Chile's Congress would meet weeks later and vote to either confirm Allende or the runner up, Jorge Alessandri. The NSC then authorized funds to bribe Chilean congresspeople to vote for Alessandri. Meanwhile, discussions detailing possible assassination scenarios against Allende were held in the White House. Nonetheless, Allende was confirmed and on November 3, took the presidency.

In true Marxist fashion, Allende gave primacy to the role of workers in Chilean society:

The building of the new social regime is based on the people, who are its protagonist and its judge. It is up to the State to guide, organise, and direct, but never to replace the will of the workers. In the economic as well as in the political field, the workers must retain the right to decide. To attain this means the triumph of the Revolution.

In line with this, Allende nationalized banks, implemented land reform, provided free milk for mothers and children, and engaged working people politically at a municipal level. A memorandum from Kissinger to Richard Nixon on November 5, 1970, warned, "US investments (totaling some one billion dollars) may be lost." These fears were not unfounded. Chile was the third-largest copper exporter in the world, though U.S. corporations controlled eighty percent of the industry. On July 11, 1971, Allende passed a constitutional amendment through Chilean Congress, empowering him to nationalize the copper industry. Rather than offering the U.S. corporations compensation, Allende declared that they owed Chile money for years of exploitation. Next, Allende nationalized the Chile Telephone Company, in which IT&T had invested \$153 million. He was playing with fire.

On September 11, 1973, which Chileans refer to as the "first 9/11," the Chilean Army, led by Augusto Pinochet, launched a coup. U.S. Navy ships patrolled Chilean waters and U.S. aircraft monitored events. Visiting American filmmaker, Charles Horman, reported to friends that at the time of the coup, he was told by an American naval engineer, "We came to do a job and it's done." Days later, Horman was arrested

and never seen again. Within hours, the Chilean Army and Navy had control, except for the Capitol and the Presidential Palace where Allende remained. When Allende would not surrender, Pinochet bombed the palace. In his last message, Allende identified, “Foreign capital and imperialism, united with reactionary elements,” as the perpetrators of the “fascism” being imposed on Chile. He assured his countrymen, “It is possible they will smash us, but tomorrow belongs to the people, the workers. Humanity advances toward the conquest of a better life.” He then took his own life with a rifle gifted him by Fidel Castro, engraved with, “To my comrade in arms.”

Under Pinochet, U.S. military aid to Chile increased extensively, and the economy was reopened to the U.S., while 3,000 people were killed, and over 40,000 people became victims of human rights violations. When questioned about Pinochet’s brutality, Kissinger said, “I think we should understand our policy— that however unpleasant they act, [this] government is better for us than Allende.” Days after the coup, in a speech at a rally in solidarity with the Chilean struggle, Allende’s daughter Beatriz, who had fled to Cuba, relayed that while holding the rifle Castro gave him, Allende had ordered the unarmed men and women to leave, “because he didn’t want useless sacrifices when the important thing would be the organization and leadership of the working class.” Even his last hours, faced with the Goliath of U.S. intervention, Allende never gave up faith in the triumph of the Revolution.

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