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A model operation - Covert action in Chile: 1963-1973

**From Ralph McGehee
8 January 1999**

United States ran covert actions in Chile between 1963 and 1973 leading to the ascension of General Pinochet. The U.S. Government's official report of this covert action said this operation epitomizes CIA covert actions (worldwide).

The operation to destroy democracy and install the dictator, Pinochet, is relevant not only to the current potential punishment of Pinochet, but more importantly demonstrates CIA's operations in the past and the present. As such it begs careful study.

One curiosity to me is that the killings associated with CIA operations raise no domestic condemnation, only condemnation of those who expose them. I often wonder how my neighbors -- if they saw men, women and children being abused, tortured, and murdered -- would react -- presumably with shocked anger. How then do these same people ignore the murderous consequences of CIA operations? Out of mind and out of cognizant sight, we champion the destruction of peoples and societies? What governmental and mental processes are employed to justify or deny such? How are those terrible actions justified to win public support? Possibly some of these questions are answered in the Church Committee's study of CIA operations in Chile.

The Congressional Investigations of the Mid-1970s

After the revelations of illegal CIA domestic operations in 1974-1975, both the Senate and the House established committees to examine the activities of the CIA and some other elements of the national security state. The Senate Committee was popularly known as the Church Committee, with the House's called the Pike Committee.

The Church Committee studied the activities of our intelligence services and published 14 books and volumes of testimony and its conclusions (one publication served as both a volume and a book). The Church Committee also published separately a study on CIA assassination operations and one on the CIA covert operation in Chile. This study was "allowed" by the CIA as a sop to the Church Committee -- to serve to represent general CIA operations. So this study, even though censored by the CIA, is the most authoritative and comprehensive available.

It is important to note that the Church Committee report cites the impact of CIA's covert operation

on its intelligence. Since this operation epitomizes worldwide CIA covert actions, what can be deduced from it about the CIA's overall intelligence?

The report states that as all of the CIA's numerous anti-democratic operations progressed, the Intelligence Directorate (DI) of the CIA was not informed. The DI wrote intelligence based on false assumptions and information.

THE STUDY

COVERT ACTION IN CHILE 1963-1973 -- STAFF REPORT of the SELECT COMMITTEE TO STUDY GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS with respect to INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES: UNITED STATES SENATE; was published by the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1975.

Covert activity was a factor in almost every major election between 1963 and 1973 and United States intervention was massive. "The scale of CIA involvement in Chile was unusual but by no means unprecedented."

From 1953 through 1970, the CIA subsidized wire services, magazines and a right-wing weekly newspaper. In the 1964 election, CIA supported the Christian Democratic (CD) candidate. (CIA support to CD candidates around the globe followed and preceded this operation). CIA funded an array of pro-Christian Democratic student, women's, professional and peasant groups and helped the CD party with polling, voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives.

In the 1964 Election -- the U.S. massively intervened in the election -- via fifteen covert action projects ranging from organizing slum dwellers, to passing funds to political parties. Specifically the Christian Democratic Party, the Democratic Front (a coalition of rightist parties), and a variety of propaganda and organizing activities. It also employed projects conducted since the 1950's among peasants, slum dwellers, organized labor, students and the media.

The CIA also conducted a massive anti-Communist propaganda campaign using the press, radio, films, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, direct mailings, paper streamers, and wall paintings. The Agency directed a scare campaign at women using images of Soviet tanks and Cuban firing squads. Christian Democratic organizations distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of a pastoral letter from Pope Pious XI. The CIA also concocted disinformation and black propaganda -- material attributed falsely to the Chilean Communist Party.

The propaganda campaign was enormous -- one group produced twenty radio spots a day in Santiago and on 44 provincial stations; twelve-minute news broadcasts five times daily on three Santiago stations and 24 provincial outlets, 26 weekly "commentary" programs, and distributed 300 posters daily. CIA rated this anti-Communist scare campaign as the deciding factor in the election of 1964 that enabled Eduardo Frei to win over Salvador Allende -- a liberal opposed by the CIA.

The Agency also ran an international propaganda campaign. It replayed contrived articles in and from abroad. These included endorsement of Frei by the sister of a Latin American leader, a "message from the women of Venezuela," and dire warnings about an Allende victory from various military governments in Latin America.

The CIA used some of the propaganda and polling mechanisms of 1964 repeatedly thereafter, in local, congressional and presidential campaigns.

COVERT ACTION 1964-1969

After its candidate Eduardo Frei was elected the CIA employed a number of covert operations with different sectors of society and ran twenty covert projects. It supported 22 candidates in the March 1965 election defeating 13 opposition candidates.

In the March 1969 congressional election ten of twelve supported candidates won. CIA also supported a splinter Socialist Party to attract votes away from Allende.

In this period the CIA ran covert operations to develop various sectors of Chilean society. One earlier project to strengthen Christian Democratic support among peasants and slum dwellers continued to help train and organize "anti-Communists" and other sectors until public exposure of CIA funding forced its termination. In the mid-1960's, the CIA supported an anti-Communist women's group active in Chilean political and intellectual life.

Two projects worked within organized labor. One combated the communist-dominated labor organization and another supported labor groups.

Various CIA projects supported media groups. One, begun in the 1950's, operated wire services. Another distributed wall posters attributed to fictitious groups, others conducted leaflet campaigns and public heckling.

COVERT ACTION AND MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

In the period 1963-1973 CIA maintained a relationship with International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT). During the 1964 elections ITT offered to use CIA as an intermediary for passing money to the Christian Democratic Party.

In Chile between 1970 and 1973, CIA and American military attache contacts with the Chilean military enabled the United States to sustain "communication" with the group most likely to wrest power from President Salvador Allende.

CIA financed a broad spectrum of activity, from simple propaganda manipulation of the press to large-scale support for political parties, from public opinion polls to direct attempts to foment a military coup. The CIA station in Santiago placed Station-dictated material through propaganda assets, directed support of publications and opposed student, peasant and labor organizations.

(The Station literally purchased the number one newspaper for Latin America, El Mercurio, and turned this respected "New York Times" into a screaming scandal sheet. Using El Mercurio's radio stations it attacked Allende daily.)

In 1970, the CIA under Nixon's injunction did not tell other elements of the U.S. government as it attempted to foment a military coup and passed weapons to coup plotters who attempted to kidnap the very constitutionally-minded General Rene Schneider. General Schneider was killed in the "kidnap" attempt.

After Allende won the election -- the CIA spent massive funds between 1970 and 1973 until Allende was murdered in September 1973. The Agency sponsored media organizations, political parties and private sector organizations. The CIA also funded at least one right-wing terrorist organization.

1. Propaganda

CIA's most extensive operation was propaganda. With recruited media assets CIA provided direct editorial guidance. One CIA project supported five media assets between 1965-1971. Most assets worked for [El Mercurio]. They wrote articles criticizing the Soviet Union; suppressed news harmful to the United States about Vietnam, and others.

Covert propaganda included "black propaganda" -- material falsely attributed to innocent individuals or groups. The Station financed wall posters, passed out leaflets and conducted other street activities. Of thirty plus covert operations, approximately half were propaganda. Each press placement had a multiplier effect -- picked up and relayed around Chile and (in some cases - the world).

The largest propaganda operation was El Mercurio. In 1971 the Station said El Mercurio and other media assets supported by CIA set the stage for the September 11, 1973, military coup.

Projects wrested control of university student organizations; supported a women's group (who conducted the CIA universal "Pots and Pans" marches to protest high prices), fought in the labor unions, and exploited a civic action front group.

CIA also funded local elections giving support to candidates selected by the American ambassador and the Station. Most funding of political parties occurred on a massive scale during the Allende years 1970-1973.

CIA funded an anti-Allende businessmen's organization.

Direct Efforts to foment a military Coup -- On September 15, 1970 -- after Allende finished first in the election of 1970 but before chosen by the Congress -- Nixon met with DCI Helms, Henry Kissinger, and Attorney General Mitchell. Neither the State Department nor the Ambassador were made privy.

CIA worked toward fomenting a military coup -- CIA knew that plans began with the abduction of the constitutionalist Chief of Staff of the Chilean Army, General Rene Schneider. On October 22, plotters attempted to kidnap Schneider who was shot and killed. Coup plotting collapsed and Allende was inaugurated.

In 1970, the U.S. and several multi-national corporations opposed Allende in a linked operation. In 1964 John McCone, former DCI of CIA and a member of ITT's board, offered assistance by American companies. In 1970, multinational corporations contacted the CIA but their offer of millions of dollars was "rejected." But CIA advised ITT on reliable funding channels utilizing two CIA assets in Chile.

After Allende was elected in 1970 the U.S. enlisted the multinational corporations to apply economic pressure.

1970 ELECCION COVERT OPERATIONS

Covert action in the 1970 elections focused on a spoiling campaign against the Popular Unity coalition supporting Allende. Allende's platform included nationalization of the copper mines, accelerated agrarian reform, socialization of major sectors of the economy, wage increases, and improved relations with socialist and communist countries.

CIA officials met with officials from ITT and advised how to pass money to Allende's opponent, Alessandri. ITT and other U.S. businesses gave money to Alessandri and the National Party.

Spoiling Operations. These had two objectives (1) undermining (Allende); and, (2) strengthening opposition forces.

To do this the CIA used six covert action projects -- an intensive propaganda campaign which made use of virtually all media within Chile and which placed and replayed items in the international press. The CIA placed propaganda through subsidized right-wing women's and "civic action" groups. A scare campaign, equated Allende's victory with violence and Stalinist repression. The Agency also ran black propaganda to sow dissent between political parties and labor organizations.

One propaganda group produced hundreds of thousands of high-quality printed pieces, posters, leaflets, and picture books while conducting propaganda through radio and press outlets. One used an editorial support group that provided political features, editorials and news articles for radio and press placement; and three different news services.

Others were a newsletter mailed to two thousand journalists, academicians, politicians and others; a booklet showing what life would be like under an Allende presidency; distribution of chronicles of opposition to the Soviet regime; posters and sign-painting teams. The latter painted "su paredon" (your wall) evoking an image of communist firing squads. It used the violence of Czechoslovakia with large photos of Prague and of tanks in downtown Santiago. Other posters showed Cuban prisoners before the firing squad, and warned that an Allende victory would mean the end of religion and family life in Chile.

One project funded press assets -- who made regular nationwide radio commentary. Others, all employees of El Mercurio, produced more than one editorial a day. These had a multiplier effect, its editorial read throughout the country via radio networks. El Mercurio was one of the most influential Latin American newspapers, particularly in business circles abroad and reached well over five million people.

On September 4, 1970, Allende won a plurality -- but no candidate received a majority. The constitution required a joint session to decide between the first- and second-placed finishers. On 15 September, Nixon told DCI Helms that an Allende regime was not acceptable and instructed the CIA to play a direct role in organizing a military coup.

After the spoiling operation to defeat Allende at the polls failed, the CIA tried to prevent him from being inaugurated. First, it used a scare campaign causing political polarization and financial panic to goad President Frei or the military into action.

U.S. efforts took two tracks. Track I comprised all approved efforts -- political, economic and propaganda to prevent Allende's ascension to power. Track II actively promoted a military coup.

Track I aimed at the "Frei Gambit" wherein the CIA tried to get President Frei to consent with this approach or better yet to help. In Europe and Latin America, influential members of the Christian Democratic movement and the Catholic Church visited or contacted Frei. Frei refused and the gambit died.

At this time the CIA ran propaganda operations with several components. Predictions of economic

collapse under Allende were replayed in CIA-generated articles in European and Latin American newspapers. In response to Allende's criticism of El Mercurio, the CIA orchestrated cables of support and protest from newspapers and an international press association, and world press coverage of the association's protest. (In a process repeated often around the world) journalists -- agents and otherwise -- traveled to Chile for on-the-scene reporting. By September 28, the CIA had agents/journalists from ten countries in or enroute to Chile. This group supplemented eight more journalists under the direction of high-level agents who were media managers.

The CIA itself generated anti-Allende propaganda: support for an underground press; placement of news items through agents; financing a small newspaper; a subsidy to Patria y Libertad a right-wing group fervently anti-Allende, and its radio program, political ads, and political rallies; and the direct mailing of foreign news articles to Frei, his wife, selected leaders, and the Chilean domestic press.

The CIA gave special intelligence and "inside" briefings to United States journalists. One "Time" cover story was radically changed from pro-Allende to anti-Allende.

The CIA's six-weeks media blitz in the Latin American and European media produced 726 articles, broadcasts, editorials, and similar items. There was no way to measure the multiplier effect of all this material.

Concurrently the CIA ran an economic offensive. Cutting off of all credits, pressuring firms to curtail investment in Chile and approaching other nations to cooperate. The operations caused a major financial panic. Yet Allende was named President and no coup was implemented.

Under Track II urgings, the military did not conduct a coup even though CIA made 21 contacts with key military and police officials to whom the Agency gave assurances of strong support at the highest levels of the U.S. Government. The Ambassador advised Chileans that if Allende was seated, the military would not receive further military assistance (MAP) and that all MAP and military sales were being held in abeyance pending the congressional election on 24 October.

A rather disorganized coup attempt aborted following the shooting of General Schneider -- a shooting that succeeded probably as part of CIA plan to "kidnap" this strict constitutionalist military leader.

Covert Action During the Allende Years, 1970-1973

After Allende ascended to the presidency, U.S. policy sought to maximize pressures on the government. Besides funding political parties, the CIA supported El Mercurio, the country's largest newspaper and the most important channel for anti-Allende propaganda. Per the CIA, these efforts played a significant role in setting the stage for the military coup of September 11, 1973.

While all of these operations progressed, testimony before the Senate by an administration spokesman denied any efforts against Allende. Kissinger in September 9, 1970 said that Allende would probably establish (a Communist government).

Alarmist "intelligence" railed about (ill-founded) threats: of Soviet military presence; the "export" of Allende's revolution and others. Those exaggerated intelligence fears activated government policy.

Two-thirds of the actions of this period were covert, the third was economic pressure to hurt Chile's

economy. The U.S cut off economic aid, denied credits and enlisted the cooperation of international financial institutions and private firms. This squeeze was exacerbated by crippling strikes.

The U.S. maintained contacts with the military to "assess" the possibility of a coup. By September 1971, the Station had built a new network of agents in the Chilean military and received almost daily reports of coup plotting.

The Station provided information, some fabricated by the CIA -- to convince senior Army officers that the one group, with the approval of Allende was acting with Cuban intelligence (DGI) in a plot to kill those officers. In December 1971 the CIA gave a packet of material, including a fabricated letter, to a Chilean military officer.

During late 1971 and early 1972, the CIA became more active and subsidized an anti-government news pamphlet, compiled arrest lists and ran its deception operation.

The Techniques of Covert Action:

The CIA funded the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the National Party (PN), and several splinter groups. The PDC and PN used some of those funds to purchase their own newspapers and radio stations. All of these groups urged citizens to demonstrate their opposition to Allende.

CIA field reporting in 1971 and 1972 claimed the government was trying to close the El Mercurio chain. In fact the press remained free. The alarming field reports were at odds with intelligence analyses. Yet the freedom of press issue was the single most important theme in the international propaganda campaign against Allende. A major opposition research organization produced books and pamphlets. One of these appeared in October 1972 at the Inter-American Press Association meeting -- it listed the Chilean Government as a threat to the freedom of the press.

The Agency's main propaganda project funded several magazines and a large number of books and special studies. It placed material in the El Mercurio chain; opposition party newspapers; two weekly newspapers; all radio stations controlled by opposition parties; and on several TV shows on three channels. The CIA also funded an opposition research organization that wrote many of the legislative bills of parliamentarians.

Support For Private Sector Organizations

The CIA supported a "powerful businessmen's organization," and associations of large and small businessmen and other groups. Some of those funds went for voter registration drives and a get-out-the-vote campaign.

Given the turbulent conditions in Chile, the interconnections among CIA-supported political parties, and the various militant trade associations and paramilitary groups prone to terrorism and violent disruption were many.

The most prominent of the right-wing paramilitary groups was Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Liberty). The CIA funded this PM group to create tension and a pretext for intervention by the Chilean military. Patria y Libertad marched at opposition rallies dressed in full riot gear. During the national truckers strike, it strew "miguelitos" (three-pronged steel tacks) on highways to bring transportation to a halt. On July 13, 1973 Patria y Libertad openly claimed responsibility for an

abortive coup. Its leader announced that his group would unleash a total armed offensive to overthrow the government.

Make the Economy Scream!

DCI Helms at a September 1970 meeting with Nixon recorded that his instructions included "Make the economy scream." Later Ambassador Korrry told Frei that "not a nut or bolt would be allowed to reach Chile under Allende."

The U.S. used its predominant position in international financial institutions to dry up the flow of credit. The U.S. Export-Import Bank loans dropped to zero in 1971. The bank dropped Chile's credit rating from "B," to "D." Loans from the Inter-American Development Bank almost ceased. The World Bank made no new loans to Chile between 1970 and 1973.

Post-1973

Following the September 11, 1973, coup the military Junta led by General Augusto Pinochet, moved quickly to consolidate power. Pinochet banned political parties, put Congress in indefinite recess, instituted press censorship, jailed opponents and canceled elections as the CIA assisted the Junta in gaining a more positive image at home and abroad. Its research organization helped the government implement new policies. Two CIA collaborators assisted the Junta in preparing a "White Book of the Change of Government in Chile" -- to justify the overthrow of Allende. It was distributed widely in Washington and foreign capitals.

Intelligence Estimates and Covert Action

Between 1969 and 1973, the CIA wrote five National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on Chile, plus several Intelligence Memoranda and (joint) Intelligence Notes. None mentioned CIA operations in Chile -- the determinant political reality.

The July 1970 NIE, prepared a little over a month before the September election, raised the question of what an Allende victory would mean. The NIE stated, in strong terms, that an Allende administration would be a Marxist-Socialist State. A Chilean version of a Soviet-style East European Communist State. This NIE stated that if Allende was elected, he would take harsh measures against U.S. business interests and challenge U.S. policies in the hemisphere. The NIE expressed concern about the expansion of Soviet military presence in Chile.

The next NIE of August 1971, was less shrill. As was the NIE of June 1972 and September 1973.

Estimates and Covert Action

The Chilean NIEs were either, at best selectively used or, at worst, disregarded by policy makers re U.S. covert actions in Chile. As the Chilean NIEs became less shrill, policy makers authorized greater covert actions.

Policy Versus Intelligence

Analysts on Chilean NIEs were not privy to information concerning covert operations of the CIA. Analysts and operators exist in two separate worlds. Information in the Operations Directorate is not available to the Intelligence Directorate. Those preparing estimates on Chile did not have access

to information which would have altered their estimates. That flaw was telling. It meant, for example, that the 1972 assessment of the durability of opposition sectors was written without knowledge of CIA funding of precisely those sectors.

CONCLUSION

The Committee report concludes: "Given the costs of covert action, it should be resorted to only to counter severe threats to the national security of the United States. It is far from clear that this was the case in Chile."

World History Archives

The retrospective history of Chile

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← [The history of Chile in general](#)

The Allende Era (to 1973)

[Allende's Chile, 1972](#)

By John Foran, Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara. A role playing learning project. The case visits the site of a meeting Allende held with his coalition partners in Lo Curro, in 1972, in which various proposals were put forward for dealing with social problems and sustaining the project of social transformation.

U.S. overthrows Chilean democracy (1963-1973)

[A model operation - Covert action in Chile: 1963-1973](#)

From Ralph McGehee. United States ran covert actions in Chile between 1963 and 1973 leading to the ascension of General Pinochet. The U.S. Government's official report of this covert action said this operation epitomizes CIA covert actions (worldwide).

[CIA, AFL-CIO, and Pinochet](#)

Kim Scipes. History of AFL involvement in South America since 1919, but especially, with CIA funding since the '60s, and the project to overthrow Chilean democracy from 1970. The work of the AIFLD network in labor penetration.

[Hot Debate over Extent of US Intervention in Coup](#)

By Gustavo Gonzalez, IPS. Right and left-wing senators in Chile argue over the extent of US intervention against the government of Salvador Allende. Also on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the coup, former US ambassador to Chile

provided new information on CIA intervention in the 1964 presidential elections in Chile, when Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei Montalva - the father of current President Eduardo Frei - defeated Allende and his coalition of socialists and communists with the support of right-wing forces.

[Still Hidden: A Full Record Of What the U.S. Did in Chile](#)

By Peter Kornbluh, *Washington Post*. The historical record of U.S. support for the former Chilean dictator remains desaparecido--disappeared--like so many victims of his violent regime. In the wake of Gen. Pinochet's arrest in London a year ago, the Clinton administration has been conducting a special "Chile Declassification Project."

[A selected list of some U.S. citizens, organizations, and intelligence officials who were involved in Chilean affairs in the 1970s](#)

From Public Information Research, Inc. Each entry accompanied by citations to documentation (75Kb).

[Castro Speaks On U.S. Role In 1973 Coup In Chile \(excerpts\)](#)

By Fidel Castro. For the first time in history, a new experience was developed in Chile: the attempt to bring about the revolution by peaceful means, by legal means. And Allende was given the understanding and support of all the world in his effort - not only of the international Communist movement, but of very different political inclinations as well.

[US Documents Confirm Destabilisation of Allende](#)

By Jim Lobe, IPS. Declassified U.S. documents add new details to the Washington campaign of 25 years ago to destabilise the government of President Salvador Allende of Chile which culminated in a bloody military coup.

[Augusto Pinochet Report: Documents Show U.S. Knew of Pinochet Crackdown](#)

By Karen DeYoung and Vernon Loeb. *Washington Post*. Days after the bloody 1973 coup that that overthrew Chilean President Salvador Allende, the CIA mission in Chile reported to Washington that the new government of Gen. Augusto Pinochet planned "severe repression" against its opponents and "the line between people killed during attacks on security forces and those captured and executed immediately has become increasingly blurred."

[Declassified Documents Detail US Role in Chile](#)

Weekly News Update on the Americas National Security Archive posted declassified US government documents on its web site which detail US attempts from 1970 to 1973 to prevent Allende from taking office and later to remove him from office. The documents include notes taken by Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms at a White House meeting with President Richard Nixon, Attorney General John Mitchell and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger.

The Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990)

[Official secret documents from Chile prove the existence of Operation Condor](#)

In *El Pais*. Official documents from the Chilean Exterior Relations Ministry prove the existence of Operation Condor, which was responsible of the extermination of thousands of civilians in South America. Operation Condor was established during the I Interamerican Reunion on Military Intelligence that took place in Chile on November 25, 1975.

[Role of former high official in Pinochet dictatorship is now subject of pointed questions in United States](#)

From Institute for Public Accuracy. Jose Pinera was Chile's Minister of Labor and Social Security from 1978 to 1980 and is now co-chair of the Cato Institute's Project on Social Security Privatization.

[Pinochet arrest raises new questions in Washington](#)

By Institute for Public Accuracy. The arrest of former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet has focused new attention on the record of his regime, which remained in power for 17 years after the 1973 coup that toppled Chile's democratically elected government.

[Under the Dictatorship](#)

Re the militarization of society after 1973; the creation in 1975 of the DINA secret police. The violation of the constitution and of human rights. The opposition and the 1988 plebescite (98 Kb).

[ICFTU mourns death of Manuel Bustos, one of Chile's primary fighters against dictatorship](#)

ICFTU Online. Manuel Bustos, a long-time champion and fighter against the Pinochet dictatorship and for democracy and workers rights in Chile died yesterday in Santiago. The government has announced three official days of mourning, followed by a state funeral, which will be attended by President Frei.

[Preventing the pending release of Augusto Pinochet](#)

Author recalls the cruel violation of women under the Pinochet dictatorship in support of a lobbying effort to have him tried in England.

[US Inquiry May Link Pinochet to Letelier Murder](#)

By Gustavo Gonzalez, IPS. The US Justice Department's decision to re-open investigations into the 1976 assassination of a former Chilean foreign minister, Orlando Letelier and his assistant, could mean the eventual implication of former dictator Augusto Pinochet in the crime.



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