

Kissinger and Chile: Why Allende had to be Overthrown

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“Chile,” Henry Kissinger famously declared during an acrimonious lunch in June 1969 with the Chilean foreign minister Gabriel Valdés, “is a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica.” His sarcastic comment, along with other disparaging remarks, came as the US national security adviser chastised Minister Valdés’s position that Washington was economically and politically abusing South America. “The message was clear,” as Valdés’s son, Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdés, interpreted Kissinger’s remark for me. “Anything that happens in Chile had no historical importance whatsoever.”

Yet only fourteen months later, Kissinger concluded that Chile was a dagger pointed at the heart of Washington, DC. Indeed, after Salvador Allende’s election in September 1970, Chile became the most consequential foreign policy crisis confronting the United States—in Kissinger’s mindset. “[The election of Allende poses for us one of the most serious challenges ever faced in this hemisphere.](#)” Kissinger wrote with emphasis in a secret memorandum to President Nixon on November 5, 1970—a revealing document that has not received the historical attention it deserves. “Your decision as to what to do about it may be the most historic and difficult foreign affairs decision you will have to make this year, for what happens in Chile over the next six-to-twelve months will have ramifications that go far beyond just U.S.-Chilean relations.”

Those ramifications, Kissinger concluded dramatically, “will even affect our own conception of what our role in the world is.”

As Chileans prepare to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the military *golpe de estado* on September 11—to which Kissinger’s legacy will be forever linked—it is an opportune time to ask a simple question about his interventionist effort to bring down the Allende government. Why? Why did the free election of a socialist president in a small, distant, and—in Kissinger’s own harsh opinion—geostrategically inconsequential country pose such a threat to the most powerful nation on Earth?

This question has intrigued me for almost half a century—since I was an undergraduate in September 1974 when the *New York Times* broke the story of the CIA’s destabilization operations in Chile. Indeed, I wrote my college honors thesis on the subject: “Explaining Rationales for US Intervention in Chile.” Each section addressed a potential explanation: the preservation of democracy, economic imperialism, the national security threat, and what Professor Abraham Lowenthal has called “the hegemonic presumption” in US foreign policy toward Latin America. Although both Nixon and Kissinger clearly presumed the historical hegemony of the United States in the region—“we set the limits of diversity,” Kissinger reportedly told his staff after Allende’s election—none of those theories fully explained their motivations.

Certainly, the US goal was not to “help and assist” the preservation of democratic institutions such as the media and political parties, as President Gerald Ford publicly claimed after the *Times* published its expose on CIA covert intervention. US efforts clearly

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sought to undermine those institutions' integrity and subvert Chile's constitutional order. Moreover, once the Chilean military seized power, the Nixon and Ford administrations dedicated US policy to helping the military dictatorship consolidate, rather than advance, a return to democracy and civilian rule. "In the United States, as you know, we are sympathetic with what you are trying to do here," Kissinger told Pinochet in a private meeting at the height of his regime's repression in June 1976. "We want to help, not undermine you."

Nor did the policy motivation seem to be support for US multinational corporations in Chile. US economic investments under the Alliance for Progress were considerable, particularly in the copper industry. And the leak of the infamous ITT papers in 1972 revealing close collaboration with the CIA in a failed attempt to thwart an Allende presidency certainly bolstered the theory of economic imperialism as the catalyst for US intervention. But as more documentation has emerged, it is clear that the Nixon White House listened to but did not prioritize the interests of the major corporations that had dominated the Chilean economy.

Nor does the declassified historical record support the more traditional rationale of safeguarding US national security. Only weeks before Allende's election, Kissinger requested a threat assessment from the US national security community, which concluded there was none. "Regarding threats to U.S. interests," National Security Study Memorandum 97 stated clearly, "the U.S. has no vital national interests in Chile," and "the world military balance of power would not be significantly altered by an Allende government." Rather than a security threat, the memo suggested, Allende's election would create a "psychological setback to the U.S. and definite psychological advance for the Marxist idea"—providing key clues to Kissinger's preoccupation about a precedent-setting, free and fair, democratic election of a socialist president in Chile.

The secret memo that Kissinger wrote to Nixon two days after Allende's inauguration, titled "NSC Meeting, November 6—Chile," provides revealing answers to the question of why the United States

sought to overthrow Allende's Popular Unity government. The document has received scant historical recognition over the decades. The White House deliberately withheld it—as well as all documents relating to the meeting of the National Security Council on November 6, 1970—from the first major investigation into covert action in Chile conducted by the special Senate Committee led by Senator Frank Church. Nor was the Kissinger memo released as part of the Clinton administration's special Chile Declassification Project after General Pinochet was detained in London in October 1998. Some years ago, while doing research to update my book *The Pinochet File*, I discovered the document in a set of declassified National Security Council staff files at the US National Archives. For me, the memorandum became the holy grail of declassified US documentation that explains Kissinger's motivation and rationale to change the course of Chilean history.

It is important to understand the circumstances and context that prompted Kissinger to write this eight-page options memo on "what strategy we should adopt to deal with the Allende Government in Chile." A special CIA operation—code-named FUBELT, which Nixon ordered and Kissinger essentially supervised—had led to the assassination of Chile's commander in chief of the army, General René Schneider but not to the expected military coup to block Allende's ascendancy to La Moneda. Instead, shocked Chileans of all political stripes rallied around Chile's constitutional transfer of power; Allende's election was ratified by the Chilean Congress, and he was inaugurated on November 3, 1970.

At that point, the Nixon administration needed to develop a broader, longer-term approach toward an Allende government. State Department officials, who were unwitting of the CIA's Operation FUBELT, did not see Allende as a major security threat to the United States; they developed a set of proposals to establish a *modus vivendi* with his Popular Unity government until the 1976 elections. Although Nixon was a hard-liner on Chile, Kissinger became concerned that the president and other US government agencies might be swayed by the State Department's position at the National Security Council meeting.

That meeting was originally scheduled for November 5, 1970. But Kissinger felt so strongly about the need to convince Nixon to adopt a policy of destabilization that he asked for the meeting to be postponed by one day so he could present his memo to the president in advance. In it, Kissinger laid out a number of candid and revealing points: First, Allende was “elected legally, the first Marxist government ever to come to power by free elections.” He was the legitimate president of Chile, Kissinger conceded. Since the United States was on record supporting self-determination and free elections, “there is nothing we can do to deny him that legitimacy.”

Second, US opposition to Allende would be further constrained by his moderation, as Allende would lead Chile in a manner “most likely to appear as an ‘independent’ socialist country rather than a Soviet satellite or ‘Communist government.’” Kissinger compared Allende to Josip Broz Tito, then leader of Yugoslavia.

Third, Allende’s moderation, in Kissinger’s mind, made him even more of a challenge: “A Titoist government in Latin America would be far more dangerous to us than it is in Europe,” he argued “because its ‘model’ effect can be insidious.”

On Kissinger’s list of “serious threats” posed by Allende, the “model effect” of his pioneering political experiment seemed most problematic for US global interests. Indeed, Kissinger advanced a domino theory of electoral socialism, spreading all the way from Latin America to Europe. “The example of a successful elected Marxist government in Chile would surely have an impact on—and even precedent value for—other parts of the world, especially in Italy,” Kissinger informed Nixon. “The imitative spread of similar phenomena elsewhere would in turn significantly affect the world balance and our own position in it.”

The US ability to prevent this “imitative spread” of other freely elected socialist leaders meant ensuring that Allende did not succeed in governing, creating a model of failure rather than success, according to the logic of Kissinger’s argument for an aggressive policy. Nixon had to

“make a decision,” Kissinger recommended, “that we will oppose Allende as strongly as we can” in order to ensure that he would fail.

At the National Security Council meeting the next day, Nixon parroted Kissinger’s words: “Our main concern in Chile,” he told the National Security Council, “is the prospect that [Allende] can consolidate himself and the picture projected to the world will be his success.” Nixon agreed with Kissinger’s argument that the United States would have to hide its policy of hostility behind a “cool but correct” posture so as not to stir Chilean nationalism, which would benefit Allende.

But a close reading of the documentation of the NSC meeting makes it crystal clear that the goal of US policy was to “bring Allende down.” Notes by CIA director Richard Helms during the meeting record Nixon as stating, “If there is a way to unseat A[llende,] better do it.” Kissinger also made that argument at the meeting, according to his talking points: “The question is whether there are actions we *can* take ourselves to intensify Allende’s problems so that at a minimum he may fail or be forced to limit his aims, and at a maximum might create conditions in which a collapse or overthrow may be feasible.”

When the coup came three years later, Kissinger and Nixon credited themselves with creating those very conditions: “We helped them.” The United States “made the conditions as great as possible,” Kissinger informed Nixon when the president noted, “Our hand doesn’t show on this one, though.” A declassified transcript of their first post-coup telephone conversation records them congratulating each other and commiserating that the media would not give them due credit.

“The Chilean thing is getting consolidated,” Kissinger told the president, “and of course the newspapers are bleating because a pro-Communist government has been overthrown.” “Isn’t that something?” Nixon mused about what he called “this crap from the Liberals” on the denouement of democracy in Chile. Kissinger agreed. “In the Eisenhower period,” he told Nixon, “we would be heroes.” //