

Communism, Chile, and the CIA:

Communications between the US government and the Chilean military during the
1973 Chilean coup

Thesis:

In 1973, the Chilean military overthrew democratically elected socialist leader, Salvador Allende, in a coup d'état sparked by the government of the United States. With the backing of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) authoritarian military leader Augusto Pinochet took power. Fearing the spread of communism, the US had initiated back channel phone and cable communications with Chilean officials that resulted in an oppressive 17-year dictatorship. These now declassified communications had a crippling effect on Chile's society that is still felt today.

A Fear of Communism:

Following World War II, the US government saw communism as an increasing threat to 'American beliefs' and to democracy worldwide. Throughout the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the removal of Marxist leaders, specifically in Latin America due to its close proximity to the US, was key leverage to prevent communist strongholds within the Western Hemisphere. The US went to extreme measures to do this, including installing dictators to power, as seen in the CIA's military overthrow of Guatemala's democratic government in 1954. Elected president in 1969, Richard Nixon was determined to avoid what he saw as a failure of previous administrations, the continued leadership of Cuba by Fidel Castro, by preventing communist rule in other countries in the Americas. In 1970, socialist Salvador Allende increased his popularity heading into the presidential election in Chile, on the platform to nationalize Chile's American owned copper companies. This prompted Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to focus their attention on Chilean politics. As they had done in Guatemala and other Latin American countries, the CIA opened communications with Chilean military officials, exploring options to prevent Allende from gaining power.

Chilean Communications with the CIA:

Nixon authorized 10 million dollars to be used to keep Allende from gaining power and to delegitimize his political views by communicating to the Chilean public through US-funded anti-socialist media ads. Despite US efforts, Allende won the 1970 presidential election becoming the first democratically elected communist leader in the Western Hemisphere. After they failed to prevent Allende from gaining power, Nixon, Kissinger, and the CIA plotted to abduct Chilean Army Commander-in-Chief Rene Schneider, because he was opposed to military involvement in political matters and believed in respecting Chile's democratic processes. The CIA, communicating with allies in Chile through informal channels to keep US involvement secret, established the plan to kidnap Schneider and blame it on Allende supporters. The US hoped these actions would create a 'coup climate' in a politically divided Chile and increase

support within the Chilean military for a US funded coup. However, Schneider was shot to death after drawing his own weapon. In a rush to cover their actions, the US paid off all Chileans involved and ordered them to throw the weapons used into the ocean. The death of Schneider rocked the country and left many citizens in shock. "Those bullets were meant for me," President Allende said.

Making the Economy Scream:

Within the first year of Allende's presidency, many of the campaign promises he had made, such as nationalizing health care and establishing a program distributing free milk to children, were in legislation. Angered by Allende's prospering socialist economy, Nixon's administration established a plan to destabilize Chile's financial state as it became increasingly clear the Chilean military had no intent to remove Allende from power. The US government manipulated foreign aid and American private investment away from Allende's administration. Pressured by withdrawal of support from the US, the World Bank and Intra-American Development Bank refused to allow loans to Chile. In spite of this, and with unanimous support from the Chilean congress, Allende nationalized copper in Chile. His government took control of the mines and refused to compensate the American and foreign owners who had been exploiting Chile's resources and workers. This further angered the US government and international companies, who withdrew all investments from Chile, amounting over the next two years to the economic downturn Nixon wanted. As Allende's third year in office approached, shortages had become a recurrence and Chile was increasingly divided along political and socio-economic lines.

Coup Climate:

Due to increasing US insinuated economic struggles, Allende's administration was losing support from Chile's middle class. Hoping these economic insecurities would push Allende from power, the US continued communications with CIA informants on coup operations. Under the influence of the US and Chile's political right, the military forced its Commander-in-Chief, appointed after the death of René Schneider, to resign because of his Marxist beliefs. Allende could see he was losing control of the military. He appointed General Augusto Pinochet, who appeared to be politically neutral, as his next Commander-in-Chief, a decision that would ultimately lead to Allende's fall. Under pressure from US political allies in Chile, Pinochet eventually agreed to a coup citing Chile's political and economic climate. A military junta was formed, and on the morning of September 11, 1973, the military entered Chile's major cities including the capital, Santiago. Soldiers rounded up Allende supporters and anyone who was thought to have ties to Chile's communist party, creating a climate of violence and terror. Many of those abducted were brought to Chile's national stadium where many were murdered, including famous folk singer Victor Jara, Allende's personal driver, and other citizens, dying on the same field where their soccer team had just recently played. Those not shot were taken to remote detention camps where they were interrogated through brutal torture. As the junta forcefully took power, Nixon and Kissinger remained in communication with Chilean military officials to monitor coup developments. Chilean Air Force pilots bombed the presidential palace,

La Moneda, where Allende remained with no intention of resigning. During the attack, Allende died by gunshot, and although his death was ruled a suicide, it remains unclear to this day. On national radio General Augusto Pinochet declared himself the leader of Chile, communicating to the people his authority and instilling a sense of fear that would endure for the next two decades.

Controlling the Communications:

Immediately following the coup, Pinochet swiftly eliminated foreign and domestic media that opposed the military junta's politics, controlling communication to the world on the horrors in Chile. In the following 17 years, Pinochet reversed much of Allende's legislation, persecuted all political dissent, rewrote Chile's constitution to guarantee himself more power, and led an authoritarian regime that oppressed the Chilean people. As the Pinochet regime's brutality became more public, the US began to recant their support while downplaying their role in manufacturing the political climate that led to the coup. Ultimately Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998 for human right violations leading citizens to lobby for declassification of the CIA documents on Pinochet's state-sponsored violence. Despite resistance from the CIA, President Clinton's administration authorized the release of 24,000 documents dating back to 1969. In doing so, the US government's involvement in installing Pinochet, who was later found guilty of human rights violations, was made public. This declassification was one of the first large-scale, public releases of CIA documents and it led future presidents to declassify documents in aid of foreign policy. The declassified documents gave both Chileans and Americans insight into the communications between their two countries that resulted in the oppression of an entire nation.