

US Policy toward Chile in the 1970s

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Frustrated Ambitions

By

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and Chris McGillion

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For Adriane: together

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INTRODUCTION

It is now reasonably common to find scholarly works analyzing US foreign policy making from the perspective of bureaucratic politics. As a discipline, however, this kind of approach is still in its infancy and continues to ignore important actors in the policy making—and policy implementing—process. In his seminal 1971 study of the Cuban missile crisis, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Graham Allison explained the need to shift the focus of analysis away from key individuals and notions of the “unitary state” when trying to understand foreign policy decisions and look instead at organizational behavior. The reason, he argued, is that “the ‘decision-maker’ of national policy is obviously not one calculating individual but rather a conglomerate of large organizations and political actors.”¹ Just how extensive the “conglomerate” engaged in handling any particular foreign policy issue may be can remain uncertain for years until documents are declassified and made publicly available. Even then, the array of political actors involved in policy discussion and determination may appear so unwieldy that scholars choose to concentrate on high-ranking officials and peak bodies such as departments in the interests of comprehensibility. Writing almost 50 years after Allison’s ground breaking study Gvosdev, Blankshain and Cooper argue—in *Decision-Making in American Foreign Policy*—that mainstream foreign policy analysis remains focused at the level of senior bureaucratic maneuvering and pays far too little attention to the “less visible bureaucratic activities that take place at lower echelons within the national security apparatus.”²

Those who occupy these “lower echelons” often help to produce—or at the very least circulate and thus promote—the language in which issues are framed and policy options are discussed. Any particular approach can come to be generally viewed in the minds of more senior officials as “positive” or “negative,” “moderate” or “radical,” according to the prevalence of the labels attached to them in departmental “Talking Points”, “Options Papers” and memos. The repetition of terms such as “chaos,” “hostile,” “threat,” “hardline” as distinct from “responsible,” “credible,” “orderly,” and “measured” can help shape the way perceptions are formed or confirmed and the beliefs associated with those perceptions take shape. In this way, the language in which bureaucratic debate is conducted can

play a crucial role in generating images in the minds of senior decision makers and influencing the set of policy preferences associated with those images. Language, in other words, matters.

More directly, lower level officials of the foreign policy bureaucracy can support and faithfully carry out decisions made by their superiors but they can just as easily manipulate, undermine, or oppose instructions. Different agencies can interpret the wording of a policy decision in vastly different ways and proceed to “enact” the policy accordingly: individuals, down to and including section officers in an embassy, can choose to emphasize aspects of a policy with which they agree and ignore or drag their feet in acting on those with which they disagree. A president’s interest in an issue may be broad and time-bound: departmental secretaries translate that interest into policy directives. But the vast network of political appointees and career service officers below the level of secretary are tasked with lending coherence to directives by engaging with the details of policy over time. This provides considerable opportunity to contest what has been decided and to influence directly how decisions are implemented. Lower level officials can also act surreptitiously as back-channel conduits of information to members of Congress—who have a vital role to play in foreign policy making—and to non-government organizations which campaign for congressional action in particular issue areas.

This book is the first detailed study of the “less visible bureaucratic activities” involved in US policy making in respect of Chile in the 1970s and how these related to the “visible” or more obvious policy statements and activities at senior levels. In the first part of the 1970s US policy toward Chile came to be seen as emblematic of the *realpolitik* approach pursued by President Richard Nixon and his chief foreign policy adviser Henry Kissinger. Subsequently Chile policy was viewed as a test case of Jimmy Carter’s alternative human rights approach. This study thus fills a gap in our understanding of an important bilateral relationship at a crucial time in US foreign policy. But it has wider implications than simply throwing light on policy toward one country during one particular period. In significant respects the goals pursued in respect of Chile by each administration during this decade—that of Nixon, Ford and Carter—were largely unrealized. This was primarily due to the single-minded purposes of Chileans themselves and the limited influence the US had (and chose) to wield upon them. As a result, these frustrated ambitions heightened the debate among US officials at every level over what policies to pursue and how to pursue them. The contest of ideas and the competition between different interests and agendas throughout the foreign policy bureaucracy

were thus thrown into stark relief, permitting a deeper reading of their operation and impact on policy outcomes. The fact that the period under study saw two quite different approaches to the management of foreign policy also allows the identification of those features which were common to both approaches and are thus inherent characteristics of the bureaucratic politics of decision making.

Nixon, Kissinger and foreign policy making

By the late 1960s, the United States confronted a number of interrelated global developments that weakened its position as the world's dominant power: the war in Vietnam, increased economic competition from powerful capitalist allies in Europe and Japan, the emergence of the Soviet Union to military superpower status, the rise of China, and resurgent nationalism in various parts of the developing world. A serious question also had arisen as to whether the American electorate and Congress would continue to support military intervention in the Third World to protect US interests. There must be global recognition, Richard Nixon had written in a 1967 essay, "that the role of the United States as world policeman is likely to be limited in the future."³ He concluded that if the US was to maintain its status as *the* global power in a stable international order, an alternative, more cost effective means of "containing Communism" must replace the kind of direct confrontation that had hitherto characterized Washington's Cold War competition with the Soviet Union.

To achieve this Nixon sought to run a foreign policy unconstrained by public opinion, Congress, or even his own bureaucracy. The result was a greater emphasis on secrecy in decision-making in Washington and an increased resort to covert intervention in the Third World. A man of firm convictions and considerable ego, Nixon had always intended to conduct foreign policy out of the White House. This meant strengthening the position of the National Security Council (NSC) and downgrading the role of the State Department. It also meant that the President's choice of an NSC Adviser was a crucial one. Not only would the appointee have to share a similar worldview but also be able to rise above the maul of competing departmental interests and pressures typically involved in policy formulation.

With these qualities in mind, Nixon turned to the director of Harvard University's International Seminar and its Defense Studies Program, Dr Henry Kissinger. Although Kissinger had declined to serve on Nixon's foreign policy committee during the presidential campaign, he had established himself by the end of 1968 as the Republican Party's pre-

eminent foreign policy expert. He was also well known for his hard line anti-communist credentials and was sympathetic to Nixon's views on how best to pursue the Cold War policy of containment. The two met for only the second time following Nixon's election victory in November, 1968, and quickly established a rapport.⁴ Kissinger accepted the offer to head the NSC, recommending that he "structure a national security apparatus within the White House that, in addition to coordinating foreign and defense policy, could also develop policy options for [the President] to consider before making decisions."⁵ Foreign policy making essentially would become a joint affair with little role for intermediaries. The State Department's John Bushnell, who was seconded to the NSC staff from 1971 to 1974, recalled that Kissinger "felt the bureaucracies did not share his global view of what he and the President were trying to do and that the cabinet secretaries were in the pockets of the bureaucracies."⁶

In one of his first acts as President, Nixon issued National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 2 which ended State Department oversight of the NSC and thereby effectively promoted the Council to the key role in the formulation of policies on major international issues—and the NSC Adviser to the role as his most influential foreign policy consultant. Nixon deemed these organizational changes necessary to create a more centralized policy process, particularly after the NSC had been sidelined during the Kennedy-Johnson years. This shift in influence would have a profound effect on recommendations by both senior officials in Washington and US ambassadors around the world and how their advice was viewed by Kissinger.

As for the State Department, Nixon dismissed it as a little more than what he termed a "recalcitrant bureaucracy."⁷ In *The White House Years*, Kissinger was even more forthcoming. Nixon, he wrote, was convinced that State personnel had no loyalty toward him, having "disdained" him as Vice President and "ignored him the moment he was out of office." Nixon's animus extended to the CIA which he was determined to bring under greater control because he regarded it as "staffed by Ivy League liberals who behind the façade of analytical objectivity were usually pushing their own preferences [and] had always opposed him politically."⁸

In hindsight at least, Kissinger was acutely aware of the implications of this restructuring. It created a situation likely to intensify the normal frictions between the NSC Adviser and the Secretary of State, and diminish the role of the latter. Reinforcing these institutional changes was a deep-seated personality clash between Kissinger and Nixon's first Secretary of State, William Rogers. A close confidant of the President's since the late 1940s, Rogers had limited foreign policy experience prior to

his appointment. A lawyer by profession, who had served as Attorney-General in the Eisenhower administration, Rogers “was trained to deal with issues as they arose on their merits,” in Kissinger’s opinion, which was less than adequate preparation for his new position. This “tactical” approach to foreign policy was in stark contrast to what the NSC Adviser described as his own “strategic and geopolitical” approach. Kissinger also viewed Rogers as overly concerned with congressional reactions to policy decisions (which Nixon would make little effort to court⁹) and the press (toward which the President adopted a “bunker mentality”¹⁰), and as basically “an insensitive neophyte who threatened the careful design of our foreign policy”¹¹ because he balked at tough decisions.

By September 1970, and after months of endless bickering between Kissinger and Rogers, Nixon’s Chief of Staff Harry “Bob” Haldeman would write in his diary that Kissinger felt sure Nixon “can’t take Rogers seriously on foreign policy.”¹² Kissinger himself recalled that by the summer of that year, Rogers was already being excluded from all key foreign policy decisions or else “brought in so late that his role was that of a ratifier rather than a policy formulator.”¹³ The responsibilities of cabinet government, in other words, were essentially taken over by NSC staff so that Nixon and Kissinger could “keep control of the agenda and the bureaucracy.”¹⁴

In the Nixon administration interdepartmental advisory committees were no longer to be chaired by State: the Senior Interdepartmental Group (SIG) that formulated policy options and reports under State’s leadership was replaced by a Senior Review Group (SRG) chaired by Kissinger and tasked with coordinating all policy papers from Interdepartmental Groups (IGs) which prepared NSC directives. Kissinger also chaired meetings of the 40 Committee (responsible for covert operations), the Defense Program Review Committee (responsible for defense policy and budgets), the Intelligence Committee, the Under-Secretaries Committee (which considered issues referred to it by the SRG that did not require a presidential decision), the Inter-Agency Regional Groups (which likewise considered regional issues that could be dealt with at the assistant secretary level), and the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) which was responsible for managing crises involving US interests abroad. Eventually, the interagency WSAG would grow in importance relative to all other groups and committees, meeting on an almost weekly basis from July 1969 until November 1973. From his position as chair of these forums, Kissinger was able to control what information and policy alternatives were presented to the President, and deluge the foreign policy bureaucracy with requests for studies and options papers—which he often

ignored.¹⁵ The net result was that policy advice in cases such as Chile was often based less on specialist knowledge than on the application of general theories and assumptions (Kissinger's) and policy decisions were often the product of little more than prejudice and gut-feeling (Nixon's).

With these organizational and personnel changes "the focus of major foreign policy and military decisions became the daily meetings between Nixon and Kissinger."¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, morale within State plummeted as the White House "circumvented [the Department] in a hundred different ways" and deliberately sidelined Secretary Rogers from any substantive policymaking role.¹⁷ On almost all major foreign policy initiatives, State was either kept out of the loop (Nixon's "opening" to China), marginalized (Vietnam policy), or trumped by the White House and the NSC in interagency deliberations (Washington's "tilt" toward Pakistan in its 1971 war with India). Another consequence was that foreign governments became confused about who spoke for the administration and/or imagined that they could play one senior US official against another.¹⁸

In September 1973, Nixon announced that Kissinger (while still retaining his NSC position) would replace Rogers as Secretary of State. Many of Kissinger's most trusted NSC staff moved to State with him, assuming key positions and creating an inner circle of favored advisers. "The locus of power moved with Kissinger to State," observed Barry Rubin, "but the authority remained personal rather than institutional."¹⁹ More than that, Kissinger's new appointment placed him in a "particularly propitious position to design, manage, and make foreign policy almost single-handedly."²⁰ According to one State Department official at the time, reports and memos were often written with an eye to purely internal departmental disputes and many simply vanished into a "black hole" of bureaucratic filing cabinets.²¹

The transition from Nixon to Gerald Ford in August 1974 had little impact on Kissinger's influence. Ford entered the White House "without a sure grasp of either the substance or the processes of foreign policy" and was eager for Kissinger—along with most of Nixon's other key foreign policy advisers—to stay in place.²² As Ford recalled later, he "didn't want to make any changes that might be misunderstood overseas."²³ Moreover, Ford had pressing domestic issues to contend with—the political aftermath of Nixon's downfall, an increasingly belligerent Congress, an economy in difficult straights—and was amenable to giving Kissinger considerable latitude in his dual roles as Secretary of State and NSC Adviser.

Ford would implement no major changes in the structure of foreign policymaking. Among the transition team recommendations he rejected was one that Kissinger be relieved of one of his two portfolios,²⁴ a

decision ensuring that there would be few, if any, shifts in the fundamental direction of US foreign policy. Not only did the existing conceptual framework of fighting the Cold War by whatever means possible remain intact but, under Ford, Kissinger pursued a managerial approach that differed little from the Nixon period—which continued to generate unease, if not hostility, at the middle and lower levels of the State Department. Through most of 1975 and 1976, Kissinger remained the dominant figure in American foreign policy, gaining his way in intra-departmental conflicts (for example, approval for a major covert program in Angola over the strong opposition of State’s bureaucracy) and interagency disagreements (winning the argument with Defense over how much force should be used to rescue the US merchant ship S.S. *Mayaguez* captured for allegedly entering Cambodian territorial waters).²⁵

As he gained confidence in the conduct of foreign affairs, however, Ford would start to listen to advice other than Kissinger’s while maintaining the basic thrust of his predecessor’s foreign policy. What differences did emerge between Ford and Kissinger resulted from congressional initiatives (for instance, on human rights), the growing chorus of opposition (in Congress and elsewhere) to superpower détente with the Soviet Union, and a vague notion entertained by some of Ford’s senior advisers that it was time to infuse moral values into the conduct of America’s dealings with the rest of the world.

Foreign policy under Carter

Jimmy Carter’s criticism of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger era was not that its leading architects had been less than vigorous in promoting US interests but that at times they had misconstrued what these interests were, deceived the American people about how they were pursuing them, and acted in ways that undermined confidence in the US commitment to the values it claimed to champion. Carter was determined to break with the *realpolitik* of those years and to substitute for secret diplomacy, covert politics and automatic support for authoritarian anticommunist regimes a moral approach based on the pursuit of human rights.²⁶

Carter later explained that his commitment to a new approach stemmed from a belief that “moral principles were the best foundation for the exertion of American power and influence.”²⁷ But Carter’s confidantes also allowed a substantial role in his motivations to “political acumen.” His senior campaign foreign policy adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, observed that not only did Carter sense there was a “pressing need to reinvigorate the moral content of American foreign policy:” he also

perceived the electoral appeal of human rights “for it drew a sharp contrast between himself and the policies of Nixon and Kissinger.”²⁸ The human rights issue, recalled campaign aides, was the one issue around which a divided Democratic Party could unite: it “appealed to [those] on the right” in the sense that it applied to the Soviet Union and its treatment of Jews, and “to the liberals in terms of Korea and Chile.”²⁹

Even as a strongly *articulated* component of Carter’s foreign policy, however, the commitment to human rights retained a key instrumental role in the administration’s thinking. State Department officials were reminded of the need to establish “credibility” with Congress as to the depth of their commitment to enable the Executive Branch “to regain [the] initiative in this field and to have more flexibility on [the] use of levers such as aid and arms policies, public reporting on human rights conditions, and voting in international financial institutions, all of which are now mandated by the Congress.”³⁰ More generally, Carter viewed a commitment to human rights as a way of helping to strengthen American influence among Third World nations which were yet to choose “future friends and trading partners.”³¹ Similarly, Brzezinski—who Carter appointed NSC Advisor—felt strongly that the approach would advance US global interests by offering these countries a counter to the liberationist rhetoric of the Soviet Union.³² For him, however, “power was the goal and morality was an instrument to be used when appropriate, abandoned when not.”³³ “Without credible American power,” he wrote, “we would simply not be able either to protect our interests or to advance more humane goals.”³⁴

In countries where vital strategic, political and/or economic interests were paramount, human rights concerns would always take a back seat to a pragmatic maintenance of friendly relations. In dealing with repressive Third World allies, the Carter administration made “ample use” of the “extraordinary circumstances” clauses written into human rights legislation to minimize or circumvent aid cutbacks.³⁵ The Carter White House commitment to human rights, in other words, was never as “absolute” or principled as the President insisted it would be in his inaugural address. Exploiting “loophole” provisions would not only compromise the policy but was bound to create frictions with Congress where the White House could initially expect a sympathetic hearing but not necessarily a trouble-free ride.

The influx of a significant number of newly elected, independently-minded Democrats to Congress in 1976 meant, in the words of Carter’s Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan that “we...had no unifying Democratic consensus, no program, no set of principles on which a majority of Democrats agreed.”³⁶ The President’s own attitude, reflected in the “the

anti-Washington thrust of the 1976 campaign,” only promised to make matters worse. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance described Carter as having “almost a contempt for the Congress” which both sides of politics were acutely aware of and made dealing with legislators on foreign policy issues “more difficult than they should have been.”³⁷ This, in turn, severely limited his ability to establish a solid support base willing to do him “favors” or push programs that required congressional assent.³⁸ In early 1978, Carter wrote in his diary of feeling particularly uncomfortable in meetings with those legislators who, ironically, were the strongest supporters of his human rights policy: “I feel more at home with conservative Democratic and Republican members of Congress than I do the others, although the liberals vote with me more often.”³⁹ Only months later, a White House legislative official reported that Carter had no “natural constituency” on the Hill.⁴⁰

Testifying before a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee in the first weeks of the new administration, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher insisted that human rights “will be woven, we are determined, into the fabric of American foreign policy.”⁴¹ In a speech at the University of Georgia in April, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance provided a slightly more detailed exposition of the policy, which concentrated on three areas: the “integrity of the person,” the enjoyment of civil and political liberties, and basic economic rights. In other words, the focus would be on specific techniques of governing, not on questions of regime origins or legitimacy. Brutal or autocratic rulers would never be opposed on the grounds of their essential nature. Vance underlined the importance of pursuing human rights in a “realistic” and calculating fashion based on each particular case, the possibilities for taking effective action and its impact on national security interests.⁴² This, he later wrote, could best be achieved through “quiet diplomacy”—a view fully shared by Christopher.⁴³ Nonetheless, Vance’s speech “offered remarkably little insight into how the administration would promote human rights, unless it was to foreshadow how full of qualifications and hesitations it would be,” concluded Barbara Keys.⁴⁴

Upon taking office, Carter moved quickly to differentiate his management style and structures from those of his immediate predecessors. He downgraded the role played by the NSC in foreign and defense policy decisions under Nixon and Ford with the objective of broadening the range of opinions and options for his consideration. To this end, he issued Presidential Directive 2 on January 20, 1977 that retained the NSC as “the principal forum for international security issues requiring Presidential consideration” but reduced its overall staff numbers and its leadership role

within the interagency committees by cutting the latter from seven to two, only one of which—the Special Coordination Committee (SCC)—would be routinely chaired by the NSC Adviser and attended by other senior foreign policy officials as appropriate. The meetings of the Policy Review Committee (PRC) would be run by the Cabinet officer (or Director of Central Intelligence) most directly responsible for the issue under discussion. Those NSC Interdepartmental Groups tasked with considering specific issues at the behest of the President also operated under the direction of the PRC.

The PRC had the most extensive charter with responsibility for issues that fell primarily within the province of a particular department but where the subject also had important implications for other departments and agencies. These ranged from major foreign policy issues with significant military aspects, to defense policy issues with international impacts, to the preparation of national intelligence budgets and resource allocations to intelligence activities. Also included were economic issues relevant to US foreign policy and security. The SCC (which replaced the Nixon-Kissinger Washington Special Action Group) dealt with issues that cut across agencies and required coordination in the development of policy options and their implementation. Though narrower in focus than the PRC, the SCC would eventually become the key clearing house for foreign policy matters due to the growing importance of crisis management and the increasing influence of Brzezinski.⁴⁵

Vance inherited from Kissinger a State Department whose institutional problems had not been addressed and whose resources had not been adequately exploited. He would later describe the Department as “suffering one of its perennial crises of morale” as a result. Determined that something had to be done to “prevent a steady erosion of the sense of identity and purpose” within the foreign-service, he proposed a re-organization that would “assign greater responsibility and authority to senior subordinates and to ambassadors in the field [and] draw regularly on the career service for advice on major foreign policy matters as well as for the conduct of routine business.” This gave the careerists greater muscle with which to pursue their particular agendas but it also ensured that intra-agency disputes over human rights would require close and careful management. Vance, however, delegated responsibility for this and a number of other issues, including Chile policy, to his Deputy, Warren Christopher, whom he described as “truly” his “alter ego,” concentrating much of his own time and energy on East-West issues and arms control rather than the day-to-day conflicts embroiling State officials.⁴⁶

Since the effort to incorporate human rights criteria into decisions about US bilateral (and multilateral) aid policy had originated in Congress, it was perhaps natural that the search to lend coherence to Carter's ambitions in this area drew at first on the language of the 1976 Harkin Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) restricting multilateral development bank loans and assistance, and US arms exports and security assistance, to any country whose government engaged in a "consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights." The State Department's February 1977 *Guidelines on US Foreign Policy for Human Rights* agreed with Congress that the prime point of reference for determining internationally recognized human rights was the UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, principally those sections dealing with crimes against the person which should constitute the "main focus for purposes of both field reporting and Department decision-making." The *Guidelines* were open-ended in defining what constituted a "consistent pattern of gross violations" since "no mathematical formula is appropriate to the wide variety of existing cases." Rather, the emphasis should be on searching for both "regular recurrences" (for instance, with respect to class, race or political persuasion) that indicated patterns of behavior, and "the extent of violations over time." In effect, rather than producing clarity, this focus encouraged interminable inter-agency disputes about trends.⁴⁷ "Consistency has always been the core problem for the [human rights] policy," said a White House official midway into Carter's term. "And the infighting gets roughest when different government agencies see their interests threatened."⁴⁸

This study reconstructs the internal debates in Washington regarding Chile policy during the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations, and assesses the extent to which the different approaches of each administration influenced decision-making in Santiago, particularly under the Pinochet dictatorship. The study is based on original interviews which no other scholarly publication has exploited with former US government officials, congressional staffers, human rights activists, and leading Chilean opposition political figures, as well as primary/archival research (in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom) the scope of which exceeds that of any currently published work on this topic. The study demonstrates that neither the sympathetic embrace of the Chilean junta by the Nixon and Ford administrations nor the more critical approach exercised toward it under Carter went unchallenged within the US foreign policy making bureaucracy. In fact, the often intense competition over policy decisions at a departmental, agency and even embassy level often spoiled attempts to implement a consistent approach to Chile and

weakened what pressure the US could bring to bear in pursuit of its own preferred outcomes. This challenges the prevailing view in much of the published literature that the US had substantially much more influence over the dictatorship than it was prepared to wield and raises findings with wider implications for scholars of US relations with Chile and Latin America, and for approaching US foreign policy more broadly.

CHAPTER 1

CONFRONTING ALLENDE

*“Chile could end up being the worst failure in our administration—
‘our Cuba’ by 1972.”*

*Henry Kissinger, speaking to President Richard Nixon’s appointments
secretary, Dwight Chapin, November, 1970.*

As Chile’s major political parties began mobilizing for the 1970 presidential election, Washington policymakers confronted the very real possibility of a leftist coalition, *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity or UP), gaining national political power through the ballot box. The UP’s candidate, Salvador Allende—a member of the Socialist Party who had strong connections to the Communist Party—had run for the presidency in 1952, 1958 and 1964, each time significantly increasing his share of the vote. In 1964, the United States had mounted a major covert action program to forestall his victory and six years later the idea of a government led by him had no more appeal. There was, however, a greater reluctance, especially in the State Department, to replicate the massive electoral intervention that had helped bring to office the incumbent Christian Democratic Party’s (PDC) Eduardo Frei, even though senior officials in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs (ARA) were willing to lend support to low-level anti-Allende covert political initiatives.

In March 1970, a memo from Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs John Crimmins requested that the interagency 40 Committee—a secretive group chaired by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and responsible for approving funding of CIA covert operations—endorse such a proposal as long as it simply targeted the UP and could not be interpreted as providing support to the right-wing National Party candidate, former President Jorge Alessandri. ARA was above all concerned about the regional consequences of a UP victory, that it would bolster “extremist groups in other countries—most immediately, Bolivia and Peru.”¹ The CIA also advocated covert intervention but in more traditional Cold War terms: an Allende presidency would *ipso facto* be a win for the Soviet Union and therefore a

“major strategic setback” for the United States. To prevent this outcome, the CIA contended, would send a clear message to Moscow as to “our determination [to] rebuff any Soviet attempt [to] establish another beachhead in the Western Hemisphere.”²

By mid-year, the White House had designated Chile a “high priority” issue—a status the CIA seemed only too willing to justify. At the end of July, for instance, the Agency produced a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Chile detailing the challenges Washington was likely to confront depending on the outcome of the election. Although bilateral relations would not be trouble-free if either the rightist Alessandri or the left-leaning Christian Democrat’s (PDC) candidate, Radimiro Tomic, became president, both “appear persuaded of the value of good relations with the US.” By contrast, an Allende government dominated by the Socialist and Communist parties would produce “much greater” problems. Apart from the threat to US economic interests in Chile, such a government would likely pose a direct challenge to the US in Latin America and globally which would be “extremely difficult” to manage. The problems foreseen ranged from such a government normalizing relations with Cuba and increasing ties with the socialist bloc to adopting an “openly hostile” stance on key issues involving “East-West confrontation” at the UN and in “world affairs generally.”³

That same month, however, President Richard Nixon requested an urgent interagency review (titled National Security Study Memorandum 97 or NSSM 97) of how the US should respond to an Allende presidency.⁴ Its major conclusions treated a leftist government in Chile as a threat to US interests but in more measured terms than had the CIA report. NSSM 97 stated that a leftist government would not pose a direct threat to “vital” US national interests within Chile, nor would it “significantly alter” the global military balance of power. Such a result, however, would raise the likelihood of “tangible economic losses” for the US and significant “political and psychological costs.”⁵ The Interdepartmental Group (IG) subsequently approved NSSM 97—effectively trumping the CIA assessment. Crimmins, who chaired the IG meetings, recalled a consensus that “the world was not going to come to an end” if Allende won and the White House “should sort of live with that situation.” Even though Crimmins had drafted the earlier memo to the 40 Committee proposing a limited covert campaign to keep the UP out of power, Chile’s democratic political culture, he reasoned, would ensure that “there was another election down the line.”⁶ A similar sentiment prevailed within the State Department according to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs William D. Rogers (who was no relation to Secretary of

State William Rogers) who was appointed in 1974. “We didn’t regard the left in Chile as a contribution to the distortion of the balance of power with the Soviet Union,” he recalled. “I mean it was laughable: [Chile] was a microscopic country.”⁷

Still, Washington’s least favored outcome was confirmed on September 7 when Allende and the UP coalition won a narrow victory over Alessandri by a mere 39,000 votes, with the PDC candidate lagging well behind in third place. From Santiago, US Ambassador Edward Korry, effectively rejecting the NSSM 97 assessment of the likely impact of this outcome, cabled Secretary of State Rogers that US interests had “suffered a grievous defeat” which would have “the most profound effect on Latin America and beyond.” For its part, the CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence produced a same day assessment which also challenged the consensus of the IG on NSSM 97 and followed it up with a paper for discussion at a 40 Committee meeting to assess the possibilities for reversing the election result. A military coup option was ruled out on the grounds that the Chilean armed forces are “incapable and unwilling to seize power.” The Agency was almost as pessimistic about a political strategy to forestall Allende forming a government on the basis of his narrow win, as this would require the support of outgoing president Eduardo Frei to secure sufficient PDC and Radical Party votes in Congress to elect Alessandri. Nevertheless, the CIA argued that the US might still have a “crucial” role to play in preventing Allende from taking office, although it cautioned that any such actions must be confined to “backstopping a Chilean effort.”⁸

Whether the US should become involved or not was “the crux of the issue,” NSC staffer Viron Vaky wrote in a memo to Kissinger. Vaky suggested that the “risks” of an Allende government outweighed the possible unanticipated consequences that might flow from US intervention to countermand the election vote. Still, while conceding that Allende was “a serious problem that would cost us a great deal,” Vaky nevertheless argued that the UP leader did not pose any kind of “mortal threat to the US” and nor was his victory likely to trigger “dominos falling” across the region. The impact of a Marxist state for the rest of Latin America, the NSC staffer suggested, “is containable.”⁹

This was not an assessment that either Nixon or Kissinger wanted to hear. Crimmins recalled a White House that “had gone ape about this—ape. They were frantic, just besides themselves.”¹⁰ Kissinger and Secretary of State Rogers, however, adopted a coolly calculating posture on what should happen next as their telephone conversation on the early afternoon of September 14 makes clear:

Rogers: I talked with the President at length about [Allende's victory]. My feeling—and I think it coincides with the President's—is that we ought to encourage a different result...but should do so discreetly so that it doesn't backfire.

Kissinger: The only question is how one defines "backfire."

Rogers: Getting caught doing something. After all we've talked about elections, if the first time a Communist wins the US tries to prevent the constitutional process from coming into play we will look very bad.

Kissinger: The President's view is to do the maximum possible to prevent an Aliente [sic] takeover, but through Chilean sources and with a low posture.

Although the findings of NSSM 97, along with Vaky's NSC assessment of the consequences of an Allende victory for the US, had now been quickly overtaken by events—or, perhaps more correctly, by the mood in the White House—both senior officials expressed concern about the more extreme assessments coming out of the Santiago Embassy. Ambassador Korry, after all, had been a newspaper man with only limited diplomatic experience (as Ambassador to Ethiopia) before being appointed to Santiago by the Johnson administration: he now found himself at the centre of what the White House believed to be a major fault line in the Cold War conflict and the tone of his reports apparently suggested to Rogers more the breathless urgency of a correspondent's dispatches than the sober assessments of an ambassador.

Rogers: I have been disturbed by Korry's telegrams. They sound frenetic and somewhat irrational. I know that he's under pressure but we ought to be careful of him. He's got tender nerve ends. I don't know if you saw his telegrams.

Kissinger: Yes, I did.

Rogers: And I think we've got to be sure he acts with discretion. He's a high-strung fellow.

Kissinger: I think what we have to do is make a cold-blooded assessment, get a course of action this week some time and then get it done.¹¹

According to Kissinger's later account in *The White House Years*, during a September 14 meeting with the conservative Chilean businessman and publisher Augustin Edwards and the President of the Pepsi Cola Company, Donald Kendall, Nixon was "triggered into action" over Allende's victory.¹² The following day, the President denounced Allende's victory at a meeting with CIA Director Richard Helms and Kissinger. Terming the result "unacceptable to the United States," the President instructed the head of the covert agency "to prevent Allende from coming

to power or to unseat him by whatever means possible.” The White House, according to Helms’ handwritten notes of the conversation, was determined to “save Chile!” irrespective of the “risks involved,” and in order to achieve this objective it was necessary to “make the economy scream.”¹³ Helms attempted to tell Nixon that no Agency official believed it was possible to mount a program to prevent Allende’s inauguration as President in early November, but said it “was like talking into a gale.”¹⁴

If Nixon, in Kissinger’s words, “was beside himself” over the election outcome, and took out his frustration on Helms, a similarly apoplectic NSC Adviser directed his wrath at the relevant foreign policy agencies whom he accused of engaging in “a complicated three cornered minuet that kept the problem from high level attention.” Kissinger singled out the State Department’s Latin American Bureau for not “put[ting] the chips on anybody” in the lead up to the election and dismissing the possibility of an Allende victory.¹⁵ He conjured up the specter of dramatic global and regional consequences for the United States if the vote was allowed to stand. Internationally, Kissinger insisted, the result would have major implications for the future success of communist parties in Western Europe. An NSC aide recalled that Kissinger was especially preoccupied with the growing political support for the Italian Communist Party and the negative message communist participation in Chile’s democratic electoral process, and Washington’s acceptance of the result, would send to the Italian voter ahead of the 1972 elections.¹⁶ Beyond warnings about the threat of “falling dominoes” in southern Europe, Kissinger further conflated the dire consequences of Allende’s election (and the importance of a “tough” US response) by situating it “against the backdrop of the [pro-Moscow] Syrian [government’s] invasion of Jordan and our efforts to force the Soviet Union to dismantle its installation for servicing nuclear submarines in the Caribbean.”¹⁷ Closer to home, he declared, Chile’s location in the mainland of South America, and the democratic origins of a Socialist-Communist-dominated coalition election victory, posed an even greater threat to US regional interests than had the Cuban Revolution during the 1960s. For Kissinger, what happened in Chile had the potential to “undermine our position in the entire Western Hemisphere.”¹⁸

The day after Helms was told to somehow rescue Chile from the left, Kissinger held a White House briefing in which he again spelled out the broader strategic implications of the election result. Implicitly treating Allende’s victory as akin to the Soviet Union forcibly establishing a client regime in Eastern Europe, he issued an ominous warning: “I don’t think we should delude ourselves that an Allende takeover in Chile would not present massive problems for us, and for democratic forces and for pro-US

forces in Latin America, and indeed to the whole Western Hemisphere.” In the current circumstances, however, the reality was that Washington’s dilemma could not easily be resolved in a manner favorable to US policy objectives. Realistically, Kissinger acknowledged, the situation was “not one in which our capacity for influence is very great at this particular moment now that matters have reached this particular point.”¹⁹

That said, and having failed to prevent the UP’s victory, the White House was determined to overturn the result if at all possible. According to Kissinger, Nixon “did not put forward a concrete scheme, only a passionate desire, unfocused and born of frustration to do ‘something’.”²⁰ Before long, however, that “something” coalesced into a two-track policy: Track 1, approved by the 40 Committee and, according to Kissinger, “closely paralleling” the instructions Nixon had given Helms, consisted of instructions to the Embassy to enlist whatever political, economic, and propaganda tools it could to induce the opposition forces to block a formal transfer of power to Allende.²¹ Track 2 concentrated on efforts to foment a military coup.²² In a telegram to Santiago on September 28, the head of a special CIA task force on Chile, “instructed his team that ‘every plot, however bizarre’ must be explored to prod the military into action.”²³ Kissinger was skeptical about a successful covert operation, terming it a “long shot” made worse by “bureaucratic resistance” especially from a “timid and unsympathetic” State Department.²⁴ He did, however, direct Ambassador Korry to inform the Chilean military leadership that “we do not want them to be deterred by what they may feel is any ambiguity with respect to our attitude toward the election of Allende” and that if they did block his inauguration the reward would be increased military aid.²⁵

That was about as much as State Department officials knew of Track 2 programs.²⁶ Even Korry was kept in the dark about what the Embassy’s CIA station and US Army attaché had been instructed to get up to. The Ambassador, according to his successor, Nathaniel Davis, was “blind-sided and short-circuited in his responsibility to represent the President.”²⁷ This extraordinary secrecy, recalled Kissinger, “was an expression of Nixon’s profound distrust of State Department machinery, which he suspected would foil consideration of his wishes.”²⁸ But it marked the beginning of a policy response suffused with internal contradictions and inconsistencies.

The Chilean military culture

Kissinger’s instincts about, along with the CIA’s assessment of, the prospects of the military moving to block Allende’s assumption of power

were correct. But the reasons why the armed forces refused to act had little to do with their capabilities (a key factor singled out in the CIA's September 7 assessment), the timidity of the State Department in egging them on (cited by Kissinger in his September 17 memo to Nixon), or any consideration of inducements (the offer made by Kissinger through Korry on October 7). Rather the Chilean military had a well-developed respect for constitutionalism, an acute sense of the dangers involved in trying to umpire Chilean politics, and sufficiently mixed feelings about the prospects of an Allende government to want to stay its hand.

Historically, the Chilean military saw itself as the country's pre-eminent institution and the very repository of national values, interests, and goals.²⁹ Its battlefield successes dated from colonial times and included the war of independence from Spain, the fierce frontier wars fought against the Mapuche Indians, and the two victorious nineteenth century wars against its neighbors, Peru and Bolivia. During the twentieth century, all three services played a key role in laying the economic and political foundations of the modern state, including the adoption of the 1925 Constitution. By the late 1960s, the Chilean military was arguably the most professional armed forces in all of Latin America.

Beginning in the 1920s, the twin ideas of the state playing a key role in industrial and economic development, and the importance of social justice in order to avoid instability and the political radicalization of the lower classes, began to permeate the thinking of the army's officer corp. So also did a nationalist outlook reflected in a strand of thinking opposed to foreign economic domination and in favor of domestic control over strategic resource sectors. None of this, however, inclined the armed forces to jettison a virulent anti-communism combined with a more generalized distrust of mass movements and the potential dangers of popular democracy. While the former had a long pedigree, dating back to the early days of the Russian Revolution, it grew in intensity during the Cold War. Like other Latin armed forces, the Chilean officer corps saw themselves locked in a mortal conflict to preserve not only their national integrity but Western civilization, which they saw as hardly the exclusive preserve of European and North American countries. Indeed, many Chilean officers expressed their irritation over what they perceived as Washington's paternalistic attitude and failure to treat them as vital, equal partners in this worldwide conflict—particularly with respect to sophisticated weapons transfers—and viewed with concern what they perceived as the West's flagging commitment to waging the moral battle against the forces of global communism.³⁰

The formative anti-communist experience of the generation of military officers who came to power in the 1970s, including Augusto Pinochet, was their direct participation in the effort of the Gonzalez Videla's Radical Party government to crush nationwide industrial strikes in the mines during 1947, declaring them part of a political effort by the Communist Party to topple the regime from power.³¹ As well, the teaching of geopolitics in Chile's war academies during the 1950 and 1960s—by Pinochet and Jose Merino, among others—served to reinforce the military's nationalist and statist but also anti-communist sentiments. Geopolitical thinking was based, in Pinochet's words, on “the idea of the state as a living organism engaged in a constant struggle for survival” against the forces of economic decline and political and moral decay.³² In this worldview, Marxist notions of internationalism and class conflict were seen as threats that weakened the nation by destroying its social cohesion.³³ Chilean military studies of insurrectionist movements from Algeria to Vietnam also reinforced the idea that civil society was a battlefield in which, left unchecked, Marxists infiltrated intellectual circles, labor unions, the media and even the Church to promote lawlessness and moral disorder to their own advantage.³⁴ This thinking reinforced the military's commitment to economic development—poverty only empowered revolutionaries—but also constituted a further reason to suspect democracy's excesses and politicians who are tempted to exploit these for the own short-sighted ends.

At the same time, the Chilean military had a vivid institutional memory of the disastrous consequences that befell it following the collapse of the Ibanez dictatorship during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Then, as the Army and Carabineros struggled to restore order on the streets of Santiago, elements within the Navy mutinied leading the newly created Air Force to bomb the fleet at anchor in the port city of Coquimbo. The combined effect of a civilian backlash against the military and the breakdown in its own institutional discipline and unity eventually persuaded senior officers to disavow any further *direct* role in politics. After 1932 the armed forces confined themselves to purely professional duties and “began to develop a social and cultural life that was completely separate from civilian society.”³⁵

In the civilian domain, meanwhile, an attitude bordering on neglect developed toward the military and its concerns. Between 1958 and 1968, the Alessandri and Frei governments presided over a contraction of the defense budget from 25 percent to 13 percent of total public spending,³⁶ and dismissed warnings from senior officers about Chile's military capabilities lagging dangerously behind those of Peru and Argentina—