sometimes presses the giants below standing on each others’ shoulders into the ground and out of our thoughts. To borrow the words from Rawls himself, our debt to him is best measured “not by the shortfall from what might be, but by the distance traveled from the beginnings.” The question is just where the beginnings should be located.

The Chilean Revolution: Conversations With Allende
by Régis Debray
(Pantheon; 201 pp.; $8.95)

James Nelson Goodsell

Salvador Allende Cassens may seem like a very unlikely exponent of revolution. Born to middle-class Chilean parents, Allende grew up in a patrician atmosphere and continues to enjoy a life-style more in keeping with traditional upper-middle-class Chilean values than one normally associates with revolutionaries. Allende, for example, collects Oriental art as others do postage stamps.

Yet it was Salvador Allende as a young doctor who helped found the Chilean Socialist Party in 1933 and who, in late 1970, became president of Chile and head of a Marxist-oriented government seeking to revolutionize Chile’s political, economic and social structures. In the two years since then, his efforts have brought significant change to Chile and promise to do even more, although vigorous opposition from the political right and center makes the going increasingly rough.

Whether Allende’s brand of revolutionary change can truly be classed as revolution is open to some question, however, and the debate is a lively one, particularly in Chile. Yet the goals sought by Allende and his Unidad Popular coalition government, composed of Socialists, Communists, Christian leftists and others, are clearly revolutionary. An insight into these goals and the Allende concept of how they can best be achieved in Chile is contained in this valuable set of conversations that French leftist Régis Debray had with Dr. Allende in early 1971.

Debray clearly admires the Chilean President, although he is challenging in the questions he puts to Allende, who styles himself the “Comrade President.” Under Allende, the goals of a revolutionary society are being sought through the laws of Chile and within the traditional framework of Chilean society. In a sense, Allende is working within the very system that he wants to change. This in turn explains some of Allende’s problems, particularly those he has with his own Socialist Party, which is calling on him to move faster and, in some instances, go outside the traditional patterns of Chilean behavior to make the desired changes.

But Allende is convinced that his approach is right—at least as far as Chile is concerned. Over and over again, in answers to questions posed by Debray, he indicates that Chile is unique and must be regarded as an individual case, that in judging Chile and his performance one must keep the Chilean reality in mind. In this connection Allende and Debray (in his introduction to the book) argue that, as president, Allende is committed to his own legitimacy. Allende recognizes that this poses problems. But he says at one point in his conversations with the French journalist that “each leader must make a concrete analysis of a concrete situation—this is the essence of Marxism. Thus, each country prepares its own tactics in the light of its own situation.”

That would seem to sum up the very Chilean nature of his program, which aims at nudging Chile as fast as possible along the road to socialism, but always within the framework of what Chilean laws permit. In his first year in office those laws permitted a great deal—the nationalization of copper, massive efforts to accelerate the agrarian reform process, takeovers of foreign and domestic companies, the nationalization of the banking industry through government purchasing of the shares of the banks, and so forth.

But these very laws provide also for an opposition which at the moment is becoming increasingly vocal and increasingly able to frustrate Allende in many of his goals. The opposition has, in effect, said “hasta” (enough) and has thrown numerous roadblocks in Allende’s path. At this time, Allende appears to be revising some of his strategy in the light of these roadblocks, and there are some in Santiago who feel that the Comrade President may well yield to the urgings of his more radical supporters who want him to push ahead with his program even if it means he goes outside the system to do it.

After reading the Debray-Allende conversations, however, one is struck with the basic desire of Allende to work within the system. Yet if Allende does stick to this approach, the very revolution which the Debray book proclaims in its title could be derailed and Allende could go down in history as less of a revolutionary than he sees himself. That in essence is Allende’s basic dilemma.

Whatever the outcome of the current struggle in Chile, the conversations in this book provide a much-needed insight into Allende the man. One caution is in order. Interviewer and interviewed think much alike, and the language is clearly Marxist-oriented. Moreover, some of the references to fact and history, particularly in Debray’s footnotes, are woefully inaccurate and one-sided. Nonetheless, The Chilean Revolution is a vigorous defense of Allende’s goals and ideals; it is important reading.