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# Seeing Allende Through the Myths

## Paul E. Sigmund

Chile since the September 11 coup is a study in contrasts. There is the striking difference between the tensions and polarization of the last months of the Allende regime and the apparent calm and renewed sense of purpose of Chile under military rule. There is the contrast between the return to normalcy during the daytime and the repressive and chilling atmosphere during the nighttime curfew hours, when shots ring out periodically, helicopters fly overhead and armored cars patrol streets where only the occasional stray dog is moving freely.

But most vivid of all is the contrast between the view of the Allende experience as propagated in Chile by the military junta through the censored press, radio and television and the impression of the Popular Unity government that has been created by the media outside of that country. The Chilean junta's portrayal of the former president as an evil and dissolute Marxist revolutionary bent on imposing a totalitarian regime by a combination of guile and force could not be further removed from the international picture of Allende as a dedicated social democrat martyred by a fascist military and the forces of international reaction.

Both views are myths, created by selecting only certain aspects of the complex patterns of recent Chilean politics in order to support a particular ideological point of view. Both need to be examined and critically evaluated in order to get an accurate picture of Chilean politics since 1970.

### MYTHS OF THE RIGHT

*1. Allende was attempting to establish a Marxist totalitarian state in Chile.*

In 1970, after Allende won 36 per cent of the popular vote, fears that he or his supporters might attempt to impose a dictatorship of the proletariat on Chile led the Christian Democrats to demand the adoption of a set of constitutional guarantees of civil and political liberties as the price of their support in the Congressional runoff. The Constitutional Statute of Democratic Guarantees included provisions protecting educational and political pluralism, freedom of speech and of the media, the autonomy and professionalism of the military, and religious liberty. During the Allende regime private schools and universities continued to receive government subsidies, the Catholic University television station became a bastion of Allende's opposition, two-thirds of the radio stations were controlled by the opposition, and by late 1972 in all the universities except one there had been elected rectors and governing bodies who were opposed to the government. Six weeks before the coup one could find on the same newsstand in downtown Santiago magazines of the extreme Right

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justifying the violent overthrow of the leftist government and others published by the Left calling for resistance by soldiers to their military superiors. *El Mercurio,* the principal opposition newspaper, continued to publish throughout the Allende period (it was closed for one day in June, 1973), while the government-owned *La Nacion* and the government-subsidized *Chile Hoy* and the Quimantu publishing house, as well as two of the three Santiago TV stations, presented the Allende government's point of view.

Chile under Allende had a greater range of freedom of expression for political views of all kinds than any other country in the world. It is true that the Allende government tried to put economic pressure on the only independent paper company, but this was successfully resisted, as was a plan announced in March, 1973, to establish a unified national school system.

*2. The Allende government condoned or even supported the use of violence by its supporters.*

There is no doubt that the level of political violence was escalated under the Allende government. Ironically, this was because it was clear from the outset that the government would not use force to evict those who seized farms, housing or factories, since—after years of criticizing conservative or reformist governments for causing bloodshed by sending in troops to end such occupations—Allende was determined not to repeat such incidents in his administration. Besides the seizures there was also a high level of street violence during the waves of pro- and antigovernment demonstrations in 1972 and 1973. Yet the total number of politically related deaths during the three years of the Allende regime is surprisingly low. Not more than a half dozen were killed in street fighting in the entire period, and none of these deaths was attributable to police action. *Libro Blanco,* the White Book published by the military junta after the coup, lists ninety-six deaths under the Allende government. Twenty-two of them took place during the military uprising of June 29, 1973. Only one came from the action of troops against lower class settlers (in August, 1972), and Allende immediately went to the settlement and apologized. By contrast, the official list of those killed on, and especially after, September 11 is now over a thousand, and unofficial estimates range between two and five thousand (not "tens of thousands" as asserted by John Pollock and Torry Dickinson in *Worldview* for March, 1974).

*3. The Allende government violated the law and the constitution.*

The opposition-dominated Congress repeatedly impeached members of Allende's cabinet for violating the law, but the principal charge against them was one of omission—failure to enforce the law against extremists. The White Book includes documentary evidence that as late as August, 1973, Allende insisted on "the need to enforce the Arms Control Law, to detain anyone who is carrying arms, and if he resists to capture and, if necessary, kill him" (p. 194, Spanish version). On August 22, 1973, the Chilean Chamber of Deputies adopted a "sense of the house" resolution *(acuerdo)* denouncing the use of loopholes in existing legislation to take over industry and agriculture without specific Congressional authorization and listing examples of nonenforcement of the law. The resolution did not cite what later turned out to be the only demonstrable direct violation of the law carried out with the connivance of the President—the use of government agencies and large quantities of government money for the manufacture and importation of arms which were distributed to supporters of the government. (Right-wing extremists of the Fatherland and Freedom Movement were also arming themselves by smuggling arms into the country.)

*4. The Allende government had planned to murder the heads of the armed forces and the leaders of the opposition parties.*

The most sensational revelation in the White Book was a document with the code name of "Plan Zeta," which proposed the "physical elimination" of the generals, admirals and other high officers at the official presidential luncheon on Army Day, September 19, and the assassination of the army troop commanders at the annual Military Parade on the same day. The White Book reproduces what appears to be an authentic document outlining the plan, but gives no details about its origin "because it is under investigation and in order not to compromise the security of the persons listed as victims and efforts to identify the assassins" (p. 49).

It is not unlikely that such a plan was developed by one or another left extremist group, but the White Book gives no evidence that it was approved by the Political Command of Popular Unity or by Allende. The document it reproduces to prove that Joán Garces, Allende's close advisor, was a party to the plan only calls for "changes in the Armed Forces and *Carabineros* [National Police] in order to strengthen the constitutional sector" (p. 94), a part of a seven-point plan produced in early June in anticipation of a "confrontation" in three to four months.

In discussing the White Book's documentation, Pollock and Dickinson's *Worldview* article, "Apologists for Terror," asserts that "nothing and no one in the Left had even hinted at the possibility of a left-wing coup," although they admit that the "Left may quite logically have made contingency plans [earlier described as "firing key generals"] to help contain the coup of the generals." But the Plan Zeta document, whatever its source, describes something a good deal more cold-blooded than that. It opens

with a list of cases in which the plan would be invoked, the first of which is "initiation of a coup d'état to achieve total power and impose the dictatorship of the proletariat against the action of all or a part of the Armed Forces supported by civilian groups." Among measures listed are the use of special cells "to eliminate with firearms the officers in command of the troops when they are in formation for the Military Parade on September 19. Simultaneously the GAP [Presidential Bodyguard] from La Moneda Palace and the Governorships will proceed to kill [*dar a baja*] the generals, admirals and other high officers who are assembled for the official luncheon held by the government on Army Day" (p. 48).

It is also clear that Allende was doing more than "training marksmen in his basement," as Pollock and Dickinson assert. Regular courses in street and guerrilla warfare were held in his presidential residence and his vacation retreat, in which Allende himself participated, and all the Popular Unity parties were training armed groups—the Communists and Socialists since 1970, the MAPU since late 1972 and the Radicals since mid-1973. But there is no proof that they or Allende knew or approved a program of assassination and a leftist coup for mid-September.

*5. By the end of the Allende regime Chileans were starving and the economy was in ruins.*

The "March of the Empty Pots" in December, 1971, first brought to world attention the increasing economic difficulties of the Allende regime. By 1973 it was necessary to wait many hours in line for bread, cooking oil, flour, detergent, sugar and cigarettes, and a black market in these and other items was flourishing. Yet other items were available, and there was no general shortage of food. Low-income groups were probably living somewhat better than they had earlier, since government controls kept prices down on many basic items (and also encouraged their diversion into the black market). In 1973 agricultural production dropped catastrophically, and there was an impending crisis in wheat which only an emergency operation by the USSR or the U.S. could have staved off. The government budget ran a 53 per cent deficit, even larger sums were issued by the Central Bank to subsidize the nationalized industries, and the inflation rate for the twelve months before July 31, 1973, was 323 per cent. Still, Chileans had had nearly a century to get used to inflation, and wages had been readjusted twice in the past year to take price rises into account. The economic situation would probably have become much worse had the military not intervened, but until September, 1973, the economy was functioning, no one was starving.

*6. By 1973 the Allende regime had lost the support of the Chilean people. The March congressional elections, which showed gains for the government, were based on massive electoral fraud.*

In the March, 1973, elections the opposition received 56 per cent of the vote, and the Allende coalition received 44 per cent. This was a drop from the figure just short of 50 per cent which the government won in the municipal election of 1971, but marked an increase over the 36 per cent which Allende himself had won in the 1970 presidential election. Actually, the real basis for comparison (which neither side uses) is the 1969 congressional election, and using this as a standard the Left received about 2 per cent less than it had in 1969.

In July, 1973, the rightist-dominated Law Faculty of the Catholic University published a report, included in the White Book, which asserted that the pro-government figure was based on "an electoral fraud of massive proportions" amounting to 200-300,000 fraudulent votes. A few individual cases of vote fraud were produced, but the major evidence in support of the claim of massive fraud was a statistical analysis which purported to show that the number of newly registered voters between 1970 and 1973 was abnormally high. The computation, however, neglected to consider citizens between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four who had joined the ranks of potential new voters since 1970, a figure which would account almost exactly for the supposedly fraudulently registered new voters. In any case, no one denies that Allende was supported by well over one-third of the Chilean people.

*7. The military coup saved Chile from communism.*

Thanks to interviews by the author and others, we now know what the next step in the Chilean drama would have been. It is now certain that Allende planned to call a plebiscite in a radio speech at noon on the day of the coup, promising to resign as president if the plebiscite was defeated. The decision on a plebiscite ended weeks of near paralysis by Allende in the face of the mounting crisis and marked a break with the left wing of his coalition, which, at a meeting on the preceding Saturday, had strongly opposed the proposal. Whether this gesture would have worked, it at least offered the possibility of a peaceful solution to the crisis.

The alternative, however, was not a Communist coup as long as the military retained the overwhelming force and institutional unity it possessed in September. If the plebiscite tactic had not worked, there seems to be little doubt that there would have been further escalation of violence and perhaps civil war, since arms were widely distributed on both sides, but the military would clearly have won any such confrontation.

## MYTHS OF THE LEFT

*1. Allende was overthrown by military fascists.*

Whatever their conduct since the coup, the Chilean military strictly observed constitutional proprie-

ties until mid-1973. In October, 1970, the army commander-in-chief was murdered by rightists because of his insistence on the observance of the constitution in the congressional runoff which was about to take place. His successor, General Carlos Prats, supported Allende and the constitution until his resignation three weeks before the coup. The military commanders were members of Allende's cabinet from November, 1972, until March, 1973, and again in August, 1973, and they put down by force an anti-Allende uprising by a tank regiment at the end of June.

Four developments during the last year of the Allende regime seem to have weighed heavily in the decision of the military commanders to stage a coup. (a) Their own involvement in the government revealed the extent of the disorganization and irresponsibility of Allende's government and the threat the economic crisis posed for national security; (b) the attempt in March and April to establish a single national school system with compulsory indoctrination courses in socialism met with unanimous opposition by the military leaders and reinforced their fears for the future (after they expressed their objections to Allende, the proposal was not dropped but "postponed"); (c) most important, the enforcement by the military of the Arms Control Law through arms searches in mid-1973 revealed large quantities of arms in government-controlled factories and worker areas. Brazil, Algeria, Ghana, Indonesia and many other examples can be cited to demonstrate that when the armed forces feel that their monopoly of force is threatened they stage a coup; (d) their decision to do so seems to have been accelerated by Allende's attempts, beginning in early August, to remove commanders he considered untrustworthy.

*2. Allende was murdered on September 11.*

After first agreeing that her husband had committed suicide, his widow now insists that he died fighting. Statements to the same effect have been published in interviews with a daughter in Cuba and a supposed member of Allende's personal bodyguard now in Mexico.° The Chilean junta has published a detailed medical report in support of the suicide theory, but the most persuasive evidence for me was confirmation of the fact of suicide in an interview I had with one of Allende's closest confidantes and ministers who was in the Palace with him. (He did not actually see the suicide, but he talked that same day with one of Allende's personal physicians who did. The physician has also published a detailed account of the circumstances of the suicide.) In addition, the story of his "bodyguard" contains a number of errors concerning persons killed in the defense of the presidential palace, as well as descriptions of events which could not have taken place because of the physical design of the building.

*3. Allende was overthrown because the U.S. Government, private banks and international agencies cut off all economic assistance and credits to Chile after his election.*°°

The thesis of "the invisible blockade" denounced by Allende himself at the United Nations in December, 1972, is at best an exaggeration. The United States Government made no new loans to Chile under Allende except for two loans to the Chilean military (which had the full support of the Allende government). However, "pipeline" aid continued to flow to Chile under existing loans even after Chile had declared a moratorium on all payments of its debts to the U.S. in November, 1971. Food for Peace shipments actually increased and—ironically—milk shipments under that program helped Allende fulfill a campaign promise to distribute free milk to every Chilean child. The Peace Corps also continued to operate, as did technical assistance programs. The International Monetary Fund made two substantial loans to Chile in late 1971 and 1972 to compensate for drops in copper prices.

The Inter-American Development Bank made two educational loans in January, 1971, but all other loan applications were "under study" until Allende's overthrow. The World Bank stopped processing a loan at the time of the nationalization of the copper companies, arguing that its long-standing policies opposed loans to countries which did not make compensation for nationalization, and shortly thereafter changed its justification for inaction to an emphasis on Chile's lack of "credit worthiness." The most important economic pressure placed on Chile was the U.S. Export-Import Bank's refusal in August, 1971, to guarantee a loan at the time of the copper nationalization dispute and its refusal after March, 1972, of other loan guarantees on what were asserted to be economic grounds (Chile's moratorium on debt payments in November, 1971).

Private bank short-term credits dropped off gradually during the Allende regime, but $35 million was still available in 1973. In his last budget message Allende's Finance Minister boasted that the drop in support from the U.S. had been more than compensated by aid and credits from the "socialist" coun-

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°Cf. James F. Conway, "Cuba, After Chile's Bloody Fall," *Worldview* (February, 1974); Luis Gonzalez Cordoba, "The Scene From Within the *Moneda*," *IDOC* (December, 1973); Beatriz Allende, "The Day They Killed My Father," *Ms.* (January, 1974).

°°Cf. Michael Harrington, "What U.S. Role in the Chilean Coup?" *Current* (January, 1974), reprinted from *Newsletter of the Democratic Left* (October, 1973); and Paul Sigmund's response to this argument in "The 'Invisible Blockade' and the Overthrow of Allende," *Foreign Affairs* (January, 1974); Joseph Collins, "Chile Suffered 'Invisible Blockade,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (October 12, 1973); Gabriel García Márquez, "The Death of Salvador Allende," *Harper's* (March, 1974).

tries, Western Europe and other Latin American countries. No doubt the credit difficulties created some problems for the Allende government, especially in the area of spare parts, but it is difficult to see how this played a major role. Policies of unrestrained printing of money and running down foreign reserves were much more significant, and they were adopted well before any credit difficulties developed.

*4. The "people" supported Allende.*

As indicated earlier, Allende never received majority support. Electoral studies indicate that in some areas he received the votes of a majority of males in low income groups. (Chilean men and women vote at separate polling places, and the results are published separately.) He never received majority support from women (including lower class women), and he was strongly opposed by middle-class, professional and lower middle-class groups. The copper mining area of Chuquicamata did not vote for him in 1970, and a lengthy antigovernment strike by the El Teniente copper miners between May and July contributed to his downfall.

The mere fact that Allende was elected by 36 per cent of the voters was not in itself the problem. The difficulty was that he proceeded to act as if he had an overwhelming majority of the country behind him and to polarize congressional and popular opinion ("I am not president of all Chileans") in a way which contrasts strikingly with Peron's skillful broadening of his base of support after his return to Argentina last year. The assumption that Allende's Popular Unity coalition was the sole repository of the popular will is best expressed in a headline in a pro-Allende newspaper announcing the results of the March elections: "The People—43%; Reactionaries [*Momios*]—56%."

*5. Allende was a democratic socialist.*

The European impression that Salvador Allende held views similar to those of European social democrats is in error. Besides being a politician with thirty-five years of experience in Chilean parliamentary politics, Allende was also a Marxist and would-be revolutionary. He worshipped Che Guevara and was a good friend of Fidel Castro. He was committed to the use of legal methods in the transition to socialism, but he lied about the illegal importation of thirteen crates of arms weighing a ton from Cuba in early 1972, underwent arms training himself, died from bullets of an automatic rifle given him by Castro, and allowed and probably encouraged the financing and arming of a parallel army by members of his government in preparation for the confrontation which they foresaw as inevitable—a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it turned out.

The obvious democratic solution to the increasing polarization in Chile, as the Communists in his own coalition and at least part of the Christian Democratic Party in the opposition could see, was a Center-Left coalition which excluded the extremes of Left and Right. However, this would have meant a break by Allende with the leadership of his own Socialist Party and the use of force against the extremist Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), who openly called for violent revolution. (It would also have meant, for the Christian Democrats, a loss of some of their supporters to the right-wing National Party.)

Tragically, no effort was made along these lines at the beginning of the Allende Administration, when it was possible, and only feeble attempts took place later, when it was nearly impossible. The result was a breakdown in the democratic *convivencia* which had enabled Chilean constitutional democracy to survive with only two interruptions since 1833: frantic arming by both sides and, finally, military intervention. As Thomas Hobbes once put it: "When no other cards are agreed upon, clubs are trumps."

*6. The American press was favorable to the Chilean coup.*

If pointing out that the opposition of a majority of Chileans (not just of the middle class) and of groups such as truckers, bus and taxi drivers and many of the copper miners, as well as the chaotic state of the nation's economy—if pointing out that all these contributed to the coup is to justify it, then the American press did indeed do so. But a review of editorial comment and press articles after the coup fails to support the kind of one-sidedness criticized in Professor Pollock's article. The junta has been strongly criticized by the *New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor* and even the *Wall Street Journal*. A *Newsweek* article in early October by John Barnes entitled "Slaughterhouse in Santiago" has been denounced by the official press in Chile. (It did exaggerate the number of dead brought to the morgue after September 11. Barnes cited a figure of 2,796 corpses in the two weeks following the coup, which turned out later to have been the number registered since the beginning of the year. A subsequent investigation by a *New York Times* reporter came up with the figure of [only!] 476 bodies with bullet wounds processed between September 11 and October 3.)

After the coup, the *Times* published an interview by one of its Santiago correspondents with middle-ranking Chilean officers (not Pollock-Dickinson's "members of the junta"), which is cited by Pollock and others to prove that the preparations for the coup went back to late 1972. (In Chile the conspiracy theory runs the other way. A story about shots fired at Robert Kennedy's son, who was skiing near the Argentine border, published in the *Times* travel section, was attacked in the Chilean press as proof that the *Times* was participating in an "orchestrated campaign" against the new government.)

The *Washington Post* has published a story criticizing the economic blockade of Chile by the Nixon Administration, and reproduced much of the text of secret testimony by the director of the CIA to the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, including William Colby's refusal to answer a question as to whether the CIA had given financial aid to those opposing the Allende Administration through subsidiaries of U.S. corporations in Brazil. "The Brazilian Connection" was also the subject of a lengthy piece of investigative reporting by a *Post* reporter about aid to the Chilean Right by business groups in Sao Paulo.

More generally, press and popular reaction to the overthrow of Allende seems to have been one of profound sadness that the experiment in carrying out rapid social reform within the framework of constitutional democracy had failed. (Polling data has revealed that the majority of Americans interviewed who knew of the coup felt that it was good neither for Chile nor for the United States.)

## CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC MYTHS

Another set of myths should also be mentioned, those emanating from the centrist Christian Democratic Party. After the fact, the Christian Democrats asserted that Allende had repeatedly spurned offers of collaboration by their party—his "fatal political error," in the opinion of their 1970 presidential candidate, Radomiro Tomic. The details cited by the Christian Democrats on this point are not fully convincing, however. They cite PDC overtures in 1971 asking Allende to support two Christian Democratic candidates from the left wing of the Party in by-elections in April and July, and they allude to proposals for cooperation between the Popular Unity coalition and the Christian Democrats in the election of mayors after the 1971 municipal elections.

It is difficult to see how Allende could have accepted these offers so soon after his own electoral triumph and after many months of denunciations of the Christian Democrats as the "new face of reaction." Moreover, Allende was interested primarily in splitting the Party rather than strengthening it, and, in fact, the two suggested candidates later left the Party to form the pro-Allende Christian Left.

Negotiations between the Christian Democrats and members of the Allende cabinet in April, 1972, do, indeed, seem to have failed as a result of action by the left wing of Allende's coalition, but a new round of talks in June, 1972, was broken off by the Christian Democrats after their time limit had expired. A final effort at dialogue between Allende and the Christian Democrats at the end of July, 1973, was terminated by the PDC after one day of fruitless negotiation.

The blame, if any is to be assigned, seems to have been attributable to both sides and, more fundamentally, to the Chilean multiparty system. Allende was unable to make concessions to the Christian Democrats because of pressure from his own Socialist Party and the extreme Left, and the Christian Democratic right wing was reluctant to enter into an agreement which would salvage what appeared after 1971 to be a sinking ship and would abandon part of their own constituency to the right-wing parties and movements.

One other myth held by the Christian Democrats has been disproved by events: the belief that the predominant political ideology among the military was Christian Democratic in orientation. (This belief was shared by the Left—as witness the assertion in a Socialist Party document published in the White Book, p. 129, that most of the military leadership "remain politically in the line of Frei.")

At least since the removal of the Christian Democratic rectors from the Chilean universities at the end of September and the adoption of a free-enterprise economic policy at about the same time, it is clear that the military are in fundamental disagreement with the Christian Democrats, and any hope that ex-President Eduardo Frei or others may have had that the military would call new elections in which the Christian Democrats would return to power has been definitively shattered by the conduct and orientation of the military since that time.

The military coup of September 11 was neither a last-ditch defense against Marxist totalitarianism nor a fascist and reactionary rupture of peaceful democratic institutions. It was, rather, a nearly (but perhaps not entirely) inevitable result of economic policies and a political stalemate which made majority rule under law almost impossible. The junta has now returned some of the agricultural land and industrial enterprises illegally seized, while promising to respect "the legal gains of workers and peasants," lifted price controls on all but most essential items, devalued (and recently revalued!) the dollar to a realistic rate, and declared Congress and the political parties "in recess." It has also proclaimed a "state of war," which it cites to justify censorship of the press, detention of most of the leaders of the Allende regime, and arrest, imprisonment and occasional murder ("shot while trying to escape") of real or suspected opponents of military rule. Meanwhile, the mythmakers of the Right and Left are busy rewriting recent Chilean history and making it increasingly difficult to arrive at an impartial judgment on the causes of the overthrow of one of the few remaining constitutional democracies in the Third World.