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Memorandum From Arnold Nachmanoff of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)

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My Conversation with Former Chilean Defense Minister Sergio Ossa—11/15/71

I met this afternoon with Sergio Ossa, former Minister of Defense in the Frei Government, [1½ lines not declassified].

The gist of Ossa's presentation was to express appreciation for the support received, and to emphasize that the PDC was determined to keep up the fight, that it was more united than ever before, and that cooperation with the other opposition elements was much improved. He stressed the importance of developing the organizational capabilities of the opposition parties, and maintaining opposition media outlets. He also noted that, from the outside it might appear that the opposition parties' inability to raise their own funds or develop their capabilities was a function of inefficiency rather than political pressure, but that in fact there were very real and heavy political pressures. The implication, of course, was that continued external support was critical and should not be conditioned upon unrealistic expectations of what the parties themselves might be able to do internally.

With regard to the general outlook for Chile, Ossa made the following comments:

—The Constitutional Reform Amendment which Allende has just submitted to the Congress is a masterful stroke, since it is a more moderate position than previously advocated by Allende on the establishment of a unicameral legislature, and it is combined with other popular features. In essence, Allende is taking a popular position by advocating that he only wishes to speed up the legislative process, and that he is not really trying to change the powers and prerogatives of the legislature. Ossa noted, however, that the PDC's strategy would be to avoid outright rejection of the amendment in the Congress, because that would allow Allende to call a plebiscite as soon as possible. They believe that by tying it up in the Congress, they can wait until the economic situation deteriorates further before allowing Allende to hold a plebiscite.

—The economic situation is deteriorating rapidly, but in Ossa's view, this is not critical for Allende and the Marxists, whose primary objective is to establish political control. He is not sure, however, that Allende really understands very well what is happening to the economic situation in Chile.

—Ossa believes Allende will try to use a confrontation with the US over copper compensation to rally popular support prior to the plebiscite. He will try to use the external confrontation to win his internal struggle for political control. Ossa urged, as Frei has done, that the US try to avoid giving Allende this issue by openly confronting him. He recognized that Allende could choose the time and circumstances of the confrontation, and that the US has legal and political requirements

which limit its flexibility, but he felt that it was essential for the US to try to quietly ride out the copper situation. Otherwise, he said, “everything we are doing will be useless”.

—If Allende loses the plebiscite, he will probably not resign as would be the normal custom. Moreover, Ossa thought if some of the UP parties believed they would not be able to retain political control (e.g., losing the plebiscite with no prospect of winning the 1973 Congressional elections), they would be prepared for civil war.

—The basically apolitical position of the armed forces has not changed significantly since Allende’s election. He thought the military would act only if a major breach of the Constitution occurred. However, he noted that among middle and junior grade officers, there was some dissatisfaction with the generals for not playing a stronger role.

Ossa asked me to convey to you his appreciation for our support, and to convey to you also the determination of the PDC leadership to continue to fight for the maintenance of democracy in Chile.