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Memorandum From the Chief of the Western Hemisphere Division, Directorate for Plans, Central Intelligence Agency (Shackley) to Director of Central Intelligence Helms

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Chile: Likelihood and Possible Consequences of a Military Coup

1. This memorandum forwards information for the DCI.

2. On 30 August 1972 in a memorandum entitled “The Deteriorating Situation in Chile,” WH Division indicated that the political temperature in Chile was rising but judged that no military coup was imminent. Since making that appraisal a number of overt events and covert intelligence reports have led us to revise our previous opinion. We now believe that a military attempt to overthrow the Allende government in the immediate future is far more likely than it was on 30 August. The following factors have heavily influenced this judgment.

a. Several intelligence reports have confirmed that Commander in Chief of the Army General Carlos Prats has recently had several clashes with President Allende over the extradition of Argentine terrorists and the declaration of a state of emergency in Santiago on 21 August. On [less than 1 line not declassified] reported that he has now become a forceful opponent of the Popular Unity (UP) government; that Prats is aware that General Alfredo Canales is planning to lead a military coup in mid-September, and that Prats will probably decide to move against the government before Canales can act.

b. Also on [1½ lines not declassified] reported that the Allende government has been warned of a possible coup attempt over the independence day holidays and that the DI and National Police (Carabineros) are reinforcing their personnel in the Santiago area in preparation for such an eventuality.

c. Street demonstrations by the right and the left continue. Although the opposition political parties remain generally opposed to a military coup attempt at this time, some opposition groups, including private sector organizations, are seeking to escalate political tensions in order to encourage military intervention.

3. The most important of the apparent coup indicators as outlined in paragraph 2 is the reported intention of General Prats to support military action against the government. If Prats remains firm in this intent, then the chances appear to favor early military intervention against Allende.

4. There are, however, several factors which tend to indicate that a coup is still not a certainty. These are:

a. We have no solid information that either General Prats or General Canales are in fact implementing their alleged coup plans. [6 lines not declassified]

b. Public opinion inside Chile does not appear to favor a military move at this time. Opposition political parties apparently are not involved in any coup planning and are believed to feel that military action, if taken, should follow the March 1973 Congressional elections, which they feel will demonstrate that the present government does not represent the mass of the Chilean electorate.

c. Notwithstanding the present crisis, the Chilean people, including the military, are prone to avoid difficult and unconstitutional solutions to their problems and have an outstanding propensity for sticking to the constitutional path, however rocky.

d. Although we are monitoring all developments in Chile very carefully, [2½ lines not declassified], it may be difficult to identify troop movements presaging a coup d'état because of the natural cover provided by military preparations for the independence day celebrations.

5. The following are the principal options now open [less than 1 line not declassified] the U.S. Government:

a. We can continue our present hands-off, monitoring stance.

b. We can pass the word to key military leaders, [less than 1 line not declassified], that we do not consider the time propitious for a coup and that we would be reluctant to provide support to a military government in the likely event that a coup attempt is followed by a bloody civil war.

c. We can provide encouragement to the military, either directly or indirectly [less than 1 line not declassified].

6. Of the three options, the first appears to be the most appropriate at this particular moment. We must, however, be prepared for a coup and should attempt to formulate our response if military intervention should occur. In this connection the following factors need attention: Will the U.S. recognize a military government immediately? Is the U.S. prepared to provide the massive economic support which will be required to ease the country's most immediate economic problems? Will we support the military in case of a civil war?

7. While the temptation to assume a positive role in support of the military is great, the following considerations indicate a need for caution:

a. We do not believe that public opinion, inside Chile or abroad, is yet prepared to accept a military takeover. Popular sentiment is definitely swinging against Allende, both inside Chile and abroad. Thus the Marxist experiment should probably be allowed to run its natural course at least through the March 1973 elections, so that Chileans and others will be convinced that the Allende government was given a fair chance and that his brand of socialism is not the road to true social progress.

b. Although the U.S. (and specifically the CIA) will undoubtedly be accused of engineering the collapse of the Allende government, if and when that occurs, these accusations will be exceptionally strident if a military coup takes place without a dramatic and legitimate pre-text (such as a flagrant violation of the constitution) and without mas-sive popular support. Even if a military coup is successful, it will provide fodder for leftist anti-U.S. and anti-administration propa-ganda which could be exploited effectively in this country as well as abroad.

c. An attempted military coup might fail, thus providing the government with an adequate pretext for cancelling the March 1973 elections and destroying the democratic opposition. An unsuccessful coup would also probably eliminate the military as a barrier to radicalization and consolidation of Allende's revolution. A partially successful coup might plunge the

country into a bloody civil war, with unpredictable consequences.

8. The Station has been directed to exercise extreme care in all its dealings with Chileans, particularly the military; to carefully monitor all events, but under no circumstances to attempt to influence them.