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Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Eliot) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)

Identificador Archival:	frus:frus1969-76v21/d311
Agencia Emisora:	NSC / Casa Blanca
Fecha del Documento:	1972-10-16
Colección / Serie:	FRUS 1969–1976, vol. XXI: Chile, 1969–1973

Nota de Archivo: *Washington. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 776, Country Files, Latin America, Chile, Vol. VII. Secret.*

Situation in Chile

Situation

Truckers' grievances with the Allende government (over such issues as freight rates and the scarcity of spare parts) formed the ostensible basis of the trucking strike which began last week in southern Chile and has spread to the more populous central zone. Government moves to counteract the strike by jailing key union leaders, impounding trucks and declaring zones of emergency appeared to stiffen resistance and gain sympathy from other groups. Shopkeepers and small businesses joined the strike with at least 65 percent effectiveness, and some other professional groups (including engineers and doctors) have publicly indicated they might follow suit. The opposition political parties have announced their support of the strike.

While Allende has called for moderation, he has also extended the zones of emergency, which inter alia place the military in charge of law enforcement, to seventeen of Chile's twenty-five provinces including almost three-quarters of the national population. The strike has had a noticeable effect on the distribution of food, especially bread, and fuel. Violence has been kept to a minimum, and as of Sunday, October 15, activities in Santiago appeared to be generally normal. The next day or two may tell whether the momentum generated by the strikes will grow or dissipate, and whether the outlines of some accommodation will begin to appear.

Assessment

We believe that the chances are about 60–40 in favor of an accommodation between the opposition and the government that will avoid a confrontation so acute as to bring about a military take over.

The current crisis has proceeded toward confrontation as far as it has in spite of general expectations that the relaxation of the tensions which had peaked in mid-September might prevail until the final moments of preparation for the March 1973 Congressional elections. The accumulation of pressure on the government through the truck owners' strike and the businessmen's sympathy strikes occurred with a spontaneity which left the opposition parties being towed along in the wake of events.

The military, which witnessed without any particular reaction the September ouster of the plotting General Canales, has no discernible desire for a confrontation which could force it into taking control of the government. Under the often-used

provisions of the state of emergency laws, now extended to the unprecedented number of 17 of Chile's 25 departments, the military has responsibility for maintaining law and order and vital services. We believe that the paramount objective of the military will be to discharge its emergency responsibilities with minimum trouble and turn the situation back to constituted civil authority. In order to do this it will exercise its considerable power of persuasion on both sides to moderate their positions, and to the extent possible will limit its physical repression to the small minority of extremists at each end of the spectrum.

The opposition is not, and probably cannot quickly become, organized in any systematic way to seize power from the government on its own, but can only hope that its manifestations of massive protest will oblige the military to take over and dictate a turn-around in the government's political-economic program.

The government must take care that its handling of the protests does not provoke such widespread and energetic reaction as to justify a military take-over.

Thus, the outcome rests on a three-way test of nerves, with the government and the opposition respectively seeking to engage the military institution's preference for accommodation in such a way as to produce the appearance of a victory for itself.

The mere fact that opposition protest has come to this point counts against the government, and the vigor of the opposition protest and the reluctance of the military to see a showdown may oblige the government to make some significant concessions. It is possible, however, that the government and its backers, carefully but significantly brandishing their traditional threat of civil war, may exhaust the endurance of the opposition and bring the country back to a semblance of normality, enabling it to claim victory over the strongest pressure the opposition has yet mustered.

The matter of contingencies which could arise in conceivable post-coup situations and which could call for U.S. policy decisions is under examination and will be taken up in the Ad Hoc Inter-Agency Working Group on Chile.