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Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Meyer) to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson)

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NSSM 97—Chile: Recommendation of Option

NSSM 97 asked what options are open to the United States in the event of an Allende victory in the Chilean presidential elections. The response prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs lists three:

Option A: Make Conscious and Active Effort to Reach Modus Vivendi

Option B: Adopt a Restrained, Deliberate Posture

Option C: Seek to Isolate and Hamper Allende’s Chile

ARA recommends the selection of Option B.

The advantages and disadvantages of each option are discussed in Section V. In sum, we believe that Option A, while worthy of inclusion in the paper, will not exist as a viable alternative to the United States because of the various actions which Allende has promised—credibly, in our view—to take. Confiscatory expropriation of the U.S. copper companies, the “denunciation” of the OAS, and the establishment of relations with Cuba would make impossible the establishment of a modus vivendi acceptable to us. For the United States to go out of its way to reach accommodation with a government so clearly hostile to it would not only be unsuitable but would encourage similar behaviour on the part of other governments. Allende’s domestic opposition would be discouraged and the United States would be seen everywhere as unable or unwilling to protect its interests.

Option C, on the other hand, seems to us to call for a U.S. response which, while undeniably vigorous in the face of outspoken hostility, would turn out to be not only ineffective but counter-productive. As the paper points out, we do not believe that the United States could even obtain hemispheric, much less global, support for an economic-denial program. At the same time, our pursuit would provide Allende with an issue—“imperialist” pressure—which would assist him to increase his popularity with the nationalistic Chilean public and probably win some sympathy for him in other nations as well. Furthermore, such a program on our part would lend credence to the argument that Chile was forced to turn to the Soviet Union for sharply increased assistance.

In our view, Option B affords an appropriately firm response to any manifestation of hostility by an Allende government, without causing the problems just listed. Its greater flexibility would enable us to harden or soften our line as developments warranted, without requiring a major policy shift; and its restrained, deliberate manner would improve prospects for obtaining the acquiescence or support of other countries for our policies and actions.