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Telegram From the Embassy in Chile to the Department of State

Identificador Archival:	frus:frus1969-76v21/d6
Agencia Emisora:	Departamento de Estado
Fecha del Documento:	1969-03-25
Colección / Serie:	FRUS 1969–1976, vol. XXI: Chile, 1969–1973

Nota de Archivo: *Santiago. Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1967–69, POL 1 CHILE–US. Secret; Exdis.*

1171. Subj: Military Postscript to Conversation with Frei. Refs: Santiago 1160; 1161; 1168.

1. Frei told me there was a facile tendency to consider the Chilean military as frozen in its apolitical posture of decades. He was no longer so persuaded. He did not wish to over-dramatize nor overdraw the current situation but he did want me to know of some recent events which indicated a changing attitude.

2. On three separate recent occasions, different members of the very highest brass in the Armed Forces had approached close collaborators of Frei to inquire as to the President's probable reaction to a coup. The soundings were taken with subtlety and finesse, but the military's thinking had come through to the President loud and clear.

3. Frei said the military, as expressed in these probes, feared an Alessandri victory. The return of the right would provoke considerable reaction from the Marxists and would lead to increasing confrontations of the forces of law and order with the populace. They did not relish such a prospect. Equally, they did not wish to see Chile under a Marxist government. Hence, they were thinking about a brief military inter-regnum in which Frei would be sent to Europe before returning to resume democratic leadership (a very dubious eventuality indeed). The supposed advantage for the President would be the maintenance of his middle-of-the-road policies and the extension of his mandate; moreover his return would be accompanied by at least a temporary but severe diminution in Communist and other extremist leadership resources since the military would act during the inter-regnum against these elements.

4. In addition to the soundings, Frei "knew" that the three commanding officers of the three services had discussed this contingency among themselves recently. (The new Navy CINC Admiral Porta told me in private conversation recently that under no rpt no conditions would the Navy permit a Marxist government.)

5. Frei indicated that he would not go along with this kind of charade although he never so stated explicitly and I did not rpt not probe at this time nor did I make any comment of any kind. (We have been making more of an effort to know military thinking although severely hampered by the impact of the restraints imposed on US military assistance and other abrasive congressional attempts to control the level of armaments.)

6. For the moment I agree with Frei that the foregoing disclosures represent more an attitude than a plan, more speculation than action. Also related is the fact that the Chilean Armed Forces are very genuinely and greatly concerned with the almost daily news agency reports from Buenos Aires appearing in the press here for the past two months of new arms purchases by Argentina or new arms plants there for each of the services. The military here knows of Argentine anxieties over the possible election of a Marxist government in Chile and the possibility if not probability of an Argentine reaction. They are also concerned by Peruvian attitudes and Bolivian hostility. They are determined to have some arms

modernization come hell, high water or the US Congress. Their pressure to this end on Frei is currently very great—and to a large extent, justifiable by any objective examination of the situation.