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Nota de Archivo: *Summary: This Office of National Estimates's assessment of the first year and a half of Allende's Presidency noted the resiliency of the Chilean political system, but argued that recent developments indicated a movement away from conciliation and toward confrontation. Source: Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Director of Central Intelligence, Job 80B01086A: White House Correspondence Files, Box 12, Chile, Office of National Estimates. Secret.*

Chile: Conciliation, Confrontation, or Coup?

During the year and a half under the Allende government, the Chilean tradition of accommodative politics has survived, despite rising pressures to by-pass the constitutional system through coercion and confrontation. The strength and resiliency of the Chilean political system is seen in the willingness of most of the chief political actors to turn to conciliation and compromise to defuse potentially explosive situations, rather than let the advocates of political violence carry the day. This memorandum assesses recent Chilean developments which, taken together, seem to tilt the odds away from conciliation and towards confrontation. We still believe that the system of accommodation will persevere over the next year or so. But the strains are becoming much greater and the political polarization more obvious, and we are less confident than before that the professional politicians will be able to put together compromises and make them stick. Thus the odds on a rupture or major alteration of the Chilean constitutional tradition are rising.

1. Summer is over in Chile, but the political atmosphere is again heating up. Government and opposition leaders alike glibly refer to a threat of civil war and there is much talk about a "fascist" conspiracy on one side and a "Stalinist" spectre on the other. Illegal armed groups representing the extreme left and far right are becoming more active in the countryside. In addition to the illegal land seizures by groups identified with the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), there are now reports of armed landowners (some dubbed "White Guards") reclaiming seized properties. There are signs that the military is becoming increasingly concerned and restive, with rightist politicians stepping up efforts to interest them in a coup. In the face of the rising political heat, Allende has alluded darkly to the fate of reformist President Balmaceda whose conflict with Congress led to a civil war, his overthrow, and his suicide in 1891. Government spokesmen have even recalled the liquidation of the left in Indonesia in attempting to dramatize the danger of counterrevolution. At the same time economic problems are mounting and add still one more set of pressures to the political arena. Shortages persist and the rate of inflation is rising.

2. If one were to take literally the inflammatory rhetoric of Chilean politicians, it might easily be concluded that Chile today resembles Spain on the eve of its Civil War. While there may be some parallels, there are important differences. In Chile, the traditional rules of the political game are still in force. At the same time that the main actors engage in verbal brinksmanship publicly on supposedly non-negotiable positions, some of them meet privately to try for compromise

solutions. Recently, when the opposition-dominated Congress passed a constitutional amendment restricting the President's power to nationalize private businesses, Allende threatened to veto key portions, and claimed that a two-thirds vote of the Congress would be necessary to override the veto. The opposition denied this, stating that an absolute majority would be sufficient to override, after which Allende's only recourse would be to call a plebiscite to decide the issue. Allende, unwilling to test his popularity in a referendum at this time, maintained that the entire question would be decided by the Constitutional Tribunal. The opposition countered that the problem was outside the Tribunal's jurisdiction. Amid suggestions from both sides that the conflict could trigger a civil war, Allende entered into talks with the Christian Democrats to reach a compromise. The immediate impasse and the violent rhetoric continue, but so do efforts for a compromise agreement.

3. This Chilean peculiarity of striving for political accommodation is one of the striking differences between Chile now and Spain in the early 1930s. In the highly charged atmosphere prevailing, the willingness of seemingly implacable political foes to engage in behind-the-scenes bargaining is a crucial element in preserving the essentially democratic character of the existing Chilean political system. The relative ease with which Chilean politicians are able to retreat and compromise when violent confrontation appears imminent is in part indicative of a shared stake in the perpetuation of the existing system by leaders of various and antagonistic political persuasions. Allende himself and the men who now lead the major Chilean political parties are successful products of this system who at one time or another have savored the fruits of power. They are skilled practitioners of the occult political arts. Practically all have served or are serving in the Chilean Senate, a body which places a premium on cloakroom conciliation and compromise, notwithstanding the vitriolic debate on the floor.

4. Yet this "political transactionalism", as it has been called, faces an uncertain future in Chile. Extremists of the left and right perceive little advantage in perpetuating the existing system, and increasingly appear to be spoiling for what they hope will be a decisive armed confrontation that settles the issue of Chile's political future their way. Moreover, while it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the Chilean public is influenced by repeated allegations of sedition, impending civil war, etc., these charges may speed the process of polarization to the point where it would be difficult to check or reverse. Indeed, there is the danger that the politicians are becoming captives of their own rhetoric, fearful that their opponents in fact are out to annihilate them politically and have few compunctions about destroying Chile's democratic institutions in the process. The usual Chilean political horsetrading would in time become all but impossible under such circumstances.

5. One of the great uncertainties is how much and how fast the attitude of the military may be changing. Reports are accumulating of military officers professing a willingness to intervene when "the time is ripe". Although they are vague on the question of how and when this condition will be fulfilled, the most likely circumstance would be an actual or threatened breakdown of public order. The conservative National Party and possibly some Christian Democrats may already favor a coup, but the military would probably be reluctant to assume responsibility for an unconstitutional change of government unless it perceived that a broad range of Chilean public opinion favored such an outcome. Clearly, this is not yet the case. The revelations of Jack Anderson are bound to exert some inhibitory effect on the plans of military and civilian plotters, if only because any move against the regime now would be associated in the public mind with US machinations. On the other hand, if the Allende government and especially the leftist extremists move too quickly and crudely to take advantage of this issue—i.e., by a broad crackdown on opposition groups—disgruntled military and civilian elements may be forced to move in self defense.

6. For a number of reasons, a direct military seizure of power does not seem to be the most likely outcome even if a major crisis were to force the military's hand. Like most Chileans, military men generally take great pride in the national heritage of respect for legality and constitutional order. And unlike many other Latin American military establishments, the Chilean armed forces take their role to be servants rather than arbiters of the national constitution. Consequently the military would

not relish forcing Allende out of office except in circumstances which appeared to allow no other acceptable solution. A more likely military response in a crisis would be an effort to exert heavy pressure on Allende to force changes in personnel and policies, to defuse the crisis and foster a return to order. While the constitution technically would remain inviolate, even this level of military intervention would represent a sharp break with Chilean political practice.

7. If there were widespread violence and the government appeared unable or unwilling to restore order, one could thus envisage a military ultimatum to Allende which at a minimum would demand carte blanche to re-establish peace. In such circumstances, the odds are that Allende (backed in particular by the Communist Party which has long had a phobia about the threat of a military coup) would yield to military demands. This would probably involve allowing the military and the Carabineros to crack down on those leftist extremists who would not accept the curbing of their revolution (including some in Allende's own Socialist Party). But Allende would perceive that he had little choice if he wished to remain in office and consolidate the considerable gains already made. Once some semblance of order was reinstituted the military would be in a good position to demand a major continuing voice in policy on the grounds that a renewal of large-scale violence had to be averted.

8. A development that could foreclose the possibility of effective military intervention would be the emergence of a deep division within the Chilean military itself. If concurrent with escalating violent encounters between pro- and anti-Allende forces, the military is riven by the same kind of conflict that divides the populace as a whole, the consequence could be military inaction. If this occurred, the prospect of civil war would loom larger. We would estimate that the likelihood in the immediate future of either a fullscale civil war, or of a military seizure of power, is quite low. The odds that the military will assume an important political role sometime over the next year or so is of a distinctly higher order of magnitude. In fact, growing numbers of professional politicians, in as well as out of the government, may come to welcome some form of military intervention to save the system from what they would perceive as a worse disaster—such as civil war.

9. If obliged at this point in time to make a prediction, we would still say that the Chilean proclivity for avoiding the brink is likely to prevent an early breakdown or major alteration of the political system. But we nonetheless recognize that the resort to political violence and inflammatory rhetoric is rising and the strength of the constitutional system is eroding—processes which cannot continue indefinitely without dramatic consequences. Thus we would conclude that the chances of the present constitutional arrangement surviving intact over the next several years are poor.