DECLASSIFIED // SECRET

Memorandum From Director of Central Intelligence Helms to President Nixon

Identificador Archival:	frus:frus1969-76ve16/d38
Agencia Emisora:	NSC / Casa Blanca
Fecha del Documento:	1970-11-12
Colección / Serie:	FRUS 1969–1976, vol. E-16: Documentos sobre Chile, 1969–1973

Nota de Archivo: *Summary: Helms offered a post-mortem on the Chilean election and suggested that even with the risks inherent with greater U.S. involvement, the outcome might have been more favorable. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 774, Country Files, Latin America, Chile, Vol. II. Secret.*

Post Mortem on the Chilean Presidential Election

1. General

a. On 3 November 1970, Dr. Salvador Allende became the first democratically-elected Marxist head of state in the history of Latin America—despite the opposition of the U.S. Government. As a result, U.S. prestige and interests in Latin America and, to some extent, elsewhere are being affected materially at a time when the U.S. can ill afford problems and in an area that has been traditionally accepted as the U.S. “backyard.” The question arises, then, as to why more energetic measures were not taken by the U.S. Government to prevent Allende’s election.

b. Allende’s election cannot be charged to lack of early warning. The possibility of an Allende victory was apparent, indeed acknowledged, as far back as 1968; and, the adverse consequences of an Allende in power, much earlier. Ample attention was given this specter at all levels in the Department of State, CIA, and White House—individually and in special committee sessions—from mid-1968 until the date of the election. Availability of funds for covert action was never in question although the purpose to which they were devoted was the subject of considerable litigation.

c. The basic problem was that reservations, almost philosophic in depth at times, persisted in the Department of State from the outset and suffocated consideration of a clear-cut, all-out effort to prevent Allende’s election:

—whether interference in the Chilean democratic process would be in the ultimate interest of the U.S. (after weighing prospects of influencing the outcome against the risks and consequences of disclosure), and,

—even conceding the wisdom of interference, whether the U.S. should actively support a chosen candidate rather than merely oppose and denigrate Allende.

Translated into stark political realities, the issue was that of Department of State being unwilling to consider supporting Jorge Alessandri, the conservative and independent candidate, for the Presidency of Chile to whatever extent necessary to assure his election over Allende. In the end, Allende’s margin of victory over Alessandri was a thin 1.4% of the popular vote: slightly less than 40,000 ballots out of almost 3,000,000 cast.

2. Phase I: The Inception of the Covert Action Program (July 1968)

a. The covert action program to deny Allende the presidency was initiated in 1968, some months before Allende had put together his extreme left coalition and sixteen months before Allende was nominated as the coalition's standard bearer. At the time, Chilean political dynamics suggested that:

—President Eduardo Frei's Christian Democratic Party was being rent by dissension and, thus, its presidential candidates would not be a strong contender;

—the 1970 presidential election would be a three man race with Allende (or another extreme leftist of his ilk) and Alessandri as the two top candidates; and,

—the Chilean Congress would decide the winner since none of the three candidates would be able to attain a majority of the popular vote.

A limited covert action program was authorized to influence the composition of the Chilean Congress in the March 1969 congressional elections. [number not declassified] moderate congressional candidates were chosen for support; [number not declassified] were elected. The key elements of a covert action mechanism suitable for election purposes was assembled and tested at that time: radio and press outlets for propaganda; agent channels into the extreme leftist coalition for intelligence; and, for political action, contacts with a dissident element of a party being wooed by the coalition. This mechanism was sustained in one guise or another until the 1970 presidential election was concluded.

b. The wrap-up report on this initial covert action program was presented to Dr. Kissinger's special committee in April 1969. The report's conclusions noted, among other things, that:

—the outcome of the recent Congressional elections indicated political polarization in Chile, and,

—"In the present political climate the Communist-Socialist front would stand perhaps an even chance of victory for the presidency" as would rightist Alessandri.

Dr. Kissinger raised the question of a U.S. Government role in the still-distant presidential elections, stating that support of Alessandri was already being urged from an outside quarter. It was decided that further consideration of such a role should be deferred until candidates were negotiated and formally declared, but pointing out an early decision would be desirable since careful preliminary work would be required for effective covert action.

3. Phase II: Further Development of Covert Action Program (April 1969–March 1970)

a. Final selection of the presidential contenders was not made until December 1969 when Allende was nominated as the candidate for a new extreme leftist coalition after a protracted period of bitter and difficult negotiation. In the seven month interlude following the Congressional elections, CIA preserved its covert action mechanism with a campaign to weaken Allende's coalition and to encourage prospective presidential candidates within the coalition other than Allende. This activity was pursued without any special authority and on CIA's initiative but with Ambassador Korry's approval. This so-called "spoiling" operation was discussed by CIA with Ambassador Korry in Washington in mid-September 1969. The Ambassador, while agreeing with its continuation, emphasized that the role of the U.S. Government in the forthcoming elections should be that of not supporting any candidate because, among other reasons, he felt that "we can't get anyone elected." At a separate meeting the same day with Assistant Secretary of State Meyer and his key people, CIA proposed that a status report be prepared for Dr. Kissinger's special committee outlining what was being done in the covert action field about the presidential election and, equally as important, what was not being done. What CIA wished to avoid, it was explained, was a sudden late request to support a specific candidate. Assistant Secretary of State Meyer was assured during this session that CIA had made no commitments to any parties or candidates with respect to the presidential election.

b. A series of discussions ensued with the Department of State on the proposed status report. The major complication involved a proposal from the CIA Station Chief in Chile to underwrite several more anti-Allende activities which, if approved, could result in side—or, even, more direct—political benefits accruing to Alessandri. Ultimately, key personnel from the Department of State, from CIA, Ambassador Korry, and the CIA Station Chief in Chile participated in a round table meeting in mid-January 1970 at which time the Department of State expressed its underlying concerns as a point of departure:

—The U.S. had been accused of being involved in a recent Chilean military uprising.

—There was a particular sensitivity in Chile now about the CIA.

—The Chileans assumed that the U.S. Government was pro-Alessandri and that any electoral intervention would redound to the benefit of Alessandri.

—From the beginning the Department had questioned the need for the U.S. Government to be involved in the election at all.

Ambassador Korry's position in defense of the proposal was essentially that anything serving to keep the Allende forces split was worthwhile despite the possibility of some political fall-out favoring Alessandri. The result was a proposal for minimal action: intensification of the existent "spoiling" operation with a firm caveat from the Department of State that strong pro-Alessandri overtones developing among any of the covert mechanisms would be cause for withdrawal of support forthwith. (This basic proposal was approved by Dr. Kissinger's special committee in March 1970. At the meeting, CIA noted that both Ambassador Korry and the CIA Station Chief in Chile were concerned about a recent Allende surge and a concomitant Alessandri loss of impetus and that, if this trend continued, support to a single candidate should be considered. In response, Department of State said it would not favor support to Alessandri.)

c. The Department of State did not waver in its position or attitude throughout the electoral campaign; as a consequence, the limits within which the covert action program functioned also remained the same throughout the campaign.

4. Phase III: Final Stage of Covert Action Program (April–September 1970)

a. From April on, Allende's fortunes waxed and Alessandri's waned with the outcome uncertain up to the date of the election. In late April, Ambassador Korry responded to the Department of State—regarding a U.S. businessman's proposal of U.S. Government support of Alessandri—in these terms:

—"Thus I remain persuaded that it is to our benefit that we remain uninvolved in the campaign of any aspirants to the Chilean Presidency and to prolong the current total lack of any mention of the U.S. in the campaign."

—"Alessandri could use more money without any question. . . . Alessandri's camp includes the overwhelming majority of the high income group . . . in a position to make contributions. . . . Reasonable questions to ask are why they are not . . . and therefore why the U.S.G. should seek to substitute for their lack of commitment and of national interest."

—"We have fewer and fewer tangible assets to employ to retain influence but if the U.S.G. were to commit itself to an anti-PDC electoral position, the short and long term consequences with respect to what is still the largest single political party in Chile and the government could have very serious consequences here."

—"Conclusion: I would understand a theoretical case to help both Alessandri and Tomic to defeat the Fidel Castroist Allende and to demonstrate a hedging U.S. sympathy to each. I cannot see any theoretical advantage in helping one to fight the other with the indirect benefits to Allende particularly when such a commitment could not be 'discreet' and when such U.S.G. intervention would lead to the further indirect 'commitment' to bail out the new government whenever it got into

trouble. . . .”

b. In mid-June, a substantial expansion of the anti-Allende covert action program was advocated by Ambassador Korry and the CIA Station Chief. Ambassador Korry reiterated, however, that his position remained “U.S. support of any candidate would be counter-productive”. Department of State representatives in discussions with CIA exhibited deep reservations about this proposition because:

—The risk was greatly heightened.

—The pro-Alessandri cast was disturbing.

—Later it would be difficult to prove to the Christian Democrats that this was not U.S. Government support of Alessandri should the Christian Democrats win the presidential election.

CIA supported the proposal for an expanded program and noted that it (CIA) viewed the prospects of an Allende government with considerable seriousness, perhaps more seriously than did the Department. The Department outlined its concerns to Ambassador Korry in a cable reading in part:

“As you know, approval of the earlier, much smaller program was conditioned on its not becoming a pro-Alessandri operation . . . to what degree does proposed greatly augmented program increase risk of use of our effort in behalf of Alessandri rather than against Allende, with obvious disadvantages. . . . We assume you would agree that, as in modest program, we would suspend expanded program if it were to be used for Alessandri.”

c. In late June 1970, Dr. Kissinger’s special committee approved the expanded program. The principal Department of State representative present stated that he harbored philosophic reservations about funding election interventions and that Assistant Secretary of State Meyer and his principal deputy opposed authorizing the current request. Shortly thereafter, Assistant Secretary of State Meyer expressed the Department’s viewpoint to Ambassador Korry in a message which opened with the statements:

“So that you will have full background, I want you to know that we in ARA and the Department as a whole recommended against approval . . . of your proposal for political action. . . . Among other considerations, we gave more weight to the exposure potential, and less weight to the protective attractiveness of being able to say ‘we had done something’. . . . We will be doing something which Chileans, who have ample resources and a great stake in the outcome, should themselves be doing. We also took into account . . . the uncertain effectiveness of the effort: The probability that, from the standpoint of our interests in Chile, all three candidates would be negative sooner or later; and the certainty that exposure would destroy any prospect of mitigating Tomic or Allende post-election attitudes.”

c. In the final two weeks of the campaign, CIA authorized a substantial infusion of funds for covert activities requested by the CIA Station Chief in Chile. CIA also arranged for some $450,000 in funds from U.S. business interests to be passed to the Alessandri camp during this period. This action was taken without reference to the Department of State for obvious reasons.

5. CIA’s Covert Action Program (April–September 1970)

a. By early 1970, CIA had amassed an array of covert action mechanisms in anticipation of a heavy role in the presidential election. [2½ lines not declassified] Knowledge generated through these intelligence capabilities was used extensively in conducting the covert action campaign.

b. Some indication of the scope and intensity of the covert action program that was undertaken for the “spoiling” operation becomes apparent in the following summary of activities targetted into a country with a total population only slightly

exceeding 9,000,000:

—Regular and frequent placements—such as news, spot campaign items, public interest programs—in [number not declassified] radio stations in Chile, [2 lines not declassified]. (Radio by far enjoys the largest media audience in Chile.)

—Regular and frequent placement of articles in [number not declassified] Chilean newspapers [less than 1 line not declassified] including the largest readership and most prestigious newspaper in Chile.

—A bi-weekly “inside information” type newsletter sent to [number not declassified] select politicians, professors, labor leaders, and economists considered among the influential political elite in Chile.

—Production and distribution of [1 line not declassified] different political posters and [number not declassified] different political handbills. [4½ lines not declassified]

—Production and mail distribution of [less than 1 line not declassified] different political brochures, directed primarily to academicians and labor leaders.

—Production, distribution, and sale [less than 1 line not declassified] of a political comic book. Finally, the Allende forces broke into the printing plant and stole the plates to preclude any further publication of the booklets.) [4 lines not declassified]

—Production and mail distribution of [number not declassified] political articles [2 lines not declassified]. (A sampling of these newspapers showed that this material was used on a regular basis, [1 line not declassified])

—Conduct of “black” operations [less than 1 line not declassified] ostensibly originating with party dissidents, targetted against the Communist and Socialist Parties. [5 lines not declassified]

6. Conclusion

The extent to which an Allende victory might have been avoided by a more positive, less circumscribed covert action program is not certain—particularly given all the imponderables of voter reactions, greater exposure, and increased risk. CIA might have been caught in an expanded program and, as a result, contributed decisively to an (as yet) uncertain Allende victory. Nonetheless, the odds for success of an expanded, positive program would have been reasonably favorable and worth the candle, particularly considering the problems and alternatives with which the U.S. Government has been faced by an Allende victory.