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Chile: Debunking the Myths

By MARK FALCOFF

In 1973 Chile's Marxist president, Salvador Allende, died in a violent coup d'etat that installed a military junta, still in power, whose record on basic freedoms is one of the worst in Latin America.

In 1972 it was discovered that International Telephone & Telegraph Co. had conspired (unsuccessfully) with the Central Intelligence Agency to prevent Allende from taking office. And in 1974 and 1975 the Church committee of the U.S. Senate found that the U.S. had played an important covert role in events preceding Allende's overthrow.

These revelations gave rise to the myth that the U.S. worked to destroy Chile's democracy and replace it with a fascist dictatorship. Today this myth serves—by analogy—to cripple U.S. foreign policy, inhibiting our support of anti-Communist struggles elsewhere.

It would seem, then, that we still have something to learn about Chile under Allende. To that end, Nathaniel Davis's "The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende" (Cornell University Press, 480 pages, \$24.95) is the first book on Chile in nearly a decade that has something fresh to say. Its author served as U.S. ambassador in Santiago during the Allende period, and he retraces his steps and those of the U.S. government with meticulous care.

Although this book is mainly a huge work of scholarship, Mr. Davis has a personal interest in it as well. After an American film maker, Charles Horman, disappeared following the coup, Horman's parents filed suit against Mr. Davis for allegedly falling to use the resources of his embassy to find their son (an action they subsequently withdrew). Also, author Thomas Hauser and Greek film maker Constantine Costa-Gavras broadly suggested in "Missing" (book and film) that Mr. Davis and his staff colluded with the Chilean military in young Horman's murder because he supposedly had evidence of a U.S. role in the coup. (In response, Mr. Davis and several other plaintiffs have filed legal action against Mr. Hauser, Mr. Costa-Gavras and Universal Pictures.)

Nonetheless, this book is civilized and fair. If anything, Mr. Davis is generous to Allende. He accurately describes the Chilean president as both a democrat and a revolutionary socialist who saw no contradiction between these two roles. To achieve a consensus he never won from the electorate, Allende brought military officers into his cabinet. Ultimately, the generals grew tired of bridging the gap between Allende and a citizenry that by 1973

faced shortages, hyperinflation, strikes and violence from both left and right.

Much of this is known, but Mr. Davis sheds new light on the story. The opposition to Allende was slow to grow, he says. Although from the start there was serious doubt about Allende's commitment to constitutional process, the Chilean right wing would never have acquired the force it did had not land and property seizures and government evasion of basic legal issues frightened many ordinary citizens. Mr. Davis shows, too, how the Communist Party, which had been the "moderating" element in Allende's coalition, was finally drawn toward a more clearly insurrectionary position. Above all, he establishes that the Chilean generals "did not rush to their task of overthrowing the President." Time and again, he writes, they went to Allende and asked him "to reconsider his policies and to control the extremists."

The role of the U.S. in these events occupies nearly half of this long book. There is no doubt that behind a facade of diplomatic correctness President Nixon and National Security Council adviser Henry Kissinger were actively hostile to the Allende government. However, they had too many other concerns to be able to pursue Allende single-mindedly. Also, negotiations over most of the main economic issues never completely broke down.

Far more controversial was covert assistance to the Chilean opposition—at least \$6 million worth disbursed over a three-year period to political parties, newspapers, radio stations and magazines. The aim was to keep the opposition alive until the next presidential election, scheduled for 1976. This assistance was not gratuitous: Toward the independent media Allende pursued a policy of asphyxiation. Instead of outright censorship, he used wage and price controls to try to bankrupt such enterprises, and as the circle of nationalized companies grew, he was better able to withhold advertising revenues. The nationalizations also put the opposition parties at a disadvantage in competing with a government that disposed of perhaps the ultimate electoral resource—the capacity to give employment.

The choice facing the U.S. was not, Mr. Davis writes, "between CIA intervention and a hands-off posture that would leave the Chilean political process to function undisturbed." Rather, it was "between covert action and abstention in a skewed political struggle."



Bookshelf

"The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende" STAT
By Nathaniel Davis

Did the U.S. play a direct or indirect role in the coup itself—even by way of communications assistance, indirect encouragement, or foreknowledge? Mr. Davis concludes that it did not. While new evidence may yet surface, 12 years of "investigative reporting" have failed to find a smoking gun.

The U.S. policy in Chile could not be called a whopping success. The price paid to avoid a civil war or the fate of Cuba or Nicaragua was very high. But it would be a tragedy twice compounded if misconceptions about the U.S. role in Chile prevented us from aiding beleaguered democrats in other parts of the world.

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