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ALLENDE'S END

The American Ambassador's Own Story

● BY NATHANIEL DAVIS

CHILE'S PRESIDENT Salvador Allende died in a bloody coup d'état that abruptly ended his country's experiment with Marxist government on Sept. 11, 1973. Nearly 12 years later, Chile continues under the military government of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who recently extended a state of siege designed to quell unrest.

At the time of Allende's fall, Nathaniel Davis was in the Chilean capital of Santiago as U.S. ambassador. An outspoken man who has attracted both praise and criticism, he was characterized in the film "Missing" as a partisan of U.S. business interests in Chile who was involved with the military officers who engineered the coup. Davis and several others are suing the makers of the film for libel.

In his forthcoming book, The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende, Davis, now retired from the Foreign Service and Hixon professor of humanities at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif., discusses U.S. policy toward Allende's government, including CIA aid to the opposition, and his role in it. He also examines Allende's personality and style. What follows is excerpted from

several chapters of the book. The article opens with Davis' account of the attack on the Moneda, the presidential palace in Santiago:

This article is excerpted from The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende by Nathaniel Davis, to be published in May by Cornell University Press. Copyright © 1985 by Cornell University. The excerpts were selected by Don Podesta of the The Washington Post Foreign Service staff.

AS WE APPROACHED the downtown area, perhaps 20 blocks from the Moneda and the embassy, we saw carabinieri systematically blocking off streets leading to the center with orange traffic cones. We raced along parallel to the line of barriers and managed to find a section that was not yet blocked. In we went. We got to within three or four blocks of the embassy before we had to park the car because of the fighting and proceed on foot. By then it was about

8:30 a.m., and the army was moving into action in the center of the city. We heard the crack of rifles, the chugging of tear-gas guns, and the burping of automatic weapons a block or two away.

At about that time Orlando Letelier was brought out of the Ministry of Defense in custody. Chilean television broadcast this scene, and my wife viewed it. She recalls that Letelier had always been positive and upbeat, his faith in the future manifest. He looked very changed. Except for newspaper photos, that was the last time my wife or I saw him.

The president, reportedly in a state of considerable excitement, inspected the defensive arrangements, had the carabinieri's small-arms magazines opened, and had some gas masks distributed. He received an added blow when Alfredo Joignant telephoned to report that investigative police headquarters had been seized by troops. It is alleged that alcohol flowed freely within the Moneda, and well it might have, for alcohol helps dull anguish—as the president had long known. Ac-

cording to Allende's daughter Isabel, the president never lost his human touch: "The last picture I have of my father in my mind's eye is as a combatant, going from window to window, raising the spirits of his guards, joking with them . . ."

At about 11:30 a.m., Socialist

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deputy Erich Schnake broadcast a dramatic but fruitless appeal to the Chilean people to march to the center of Santiago.

Outside the Moneda the action resumed. Tanks of the Second Armored Regiment were drawn up north of the palace across Constitution Square. Soldiers of the Infantry School were on Teatinos Street, between the Hotel Carrera and the U.S. Embassy offices. Troops of the army's Noncommissioned Officers' School were on Morande Street, east of the Moneda. The Tacna Regiment was to the south, on the Alameda O'Higgins. All these troops were exchanging fire with the [president's guard] in the Moneda and with the snipers on the higher floors of surrounding buildings.

The junta's renewed demands that Allende and his people surrender were met by the president's continued refusal to do so. Pinochet urged that the air bombardment commence without further delay, as he feared that Allende was trying to gain time for the workers of the industrial belts to come to the center of the city.

Finally the aerial attack commenced. The first pass came at 11:52, followed by six more in the ensuing 21 minutes. The planes turned behind San Cristobal hill, went into a very steep dive and launched their rockets when they were over the Mapocho railroad station. Their aim was perfect. The rockets went

straight into the doors and windows of the north side of the Moneda Palace.

Those of us in the embassy felt the tremor of the explosions beneath our feet. In a letter a day or two later my wife described the scene as it looked from four miles away, on the ridge on which the embassy residence sat:

"Shortly before noon we heard the jets. It was an eerily beautiful sight as they came in from nowhere. The sun glinted on their wings. There were only two. Still in formation, they swung gracefully through the sky in a great circle, and then they tipped and dove . . . one bomb each . . . then, a gentle curve upwards. Sun glistened on the wings again, and there was another run."

The president and his entourage had taken refuge in the side cellars of the Moneda, on the theory that the pilots would hit only the central portion of the palace in order to avoid damaging surrounding buildings.

The bombardment set fires in the Moneda, and the conflagration soon spread, filling much of the north side of the building with smoke, flames and gases. The defenders' gas masks apparently were not effective. Part of the roof caved in, and pieces of plaster, splintered furniture, curtains and office materials were strewn about.

Apparently Allende died between 1:50 p.m. and 2:20 p.m.; accounts differ as to the time. Leftist descriptions of Allende's death have Chilean soldiers gunning the president down in a firefight. But Salvador Allende probably died by his own act in the Independence Salon from bullets from Fidel Castro's gift submachine gun. That conclusion does not diminish Allende's real courage in his last hours.

I AM REASONABLY confident that it was not U.S. policy during my time in Chile to "destabilize" Allende and bring him down. I cannot say with the same confidence, however, that all personalities in Washington were of the same mind. Seymour Hersh has explicitly charged that there were sharp differences within the Nixon administration. On 8 September 1974, quoting [Director of Central Intelligence William] Colby indirectly and other reliable U.S. officials as his sources, he described the lineup as follows: "The agency's operations from 1970 to 1973 were considered a test of the technique of using heavy cash payments to bring down a government viewed as antagonistic toward the United States. "The State Department . . . wanted to stretch out any clandestine activities to permit the regime to come to a political end. The argument was between those who wanted to use force and end it quickly rather than to play it out. Henry [Kissinger] was on the side of the former—he was for considerable obstruction."

Hersh's description of a kind of laboratory test of a technique seems implausible. From all we know about their feelings, both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had deeply held emotions and convictions about Chile.

A judgment about U.S. covert financial intervention has to take some account of what others were doing. In Chile, as in most democracies, the continuation of constitu-

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tional government depended on the survival of a constitutional opposition and the UP [Allende's ruling Unidad Popular coalition] government was attempting to asphyxiate its adversaries.

There were all too many thumbs pushing to unbalance the Chilean political scales. Not only did the Allende government try to cripple the opposition, but UP leaders and their foreign backers also financed progov-

bring Chile to socialism through legal and institutional means? Was he sincere when he presented his vision of the Chilean Way in his May 1971 address to the Congress? I believe that the answer is "yes"; Allende wanted these things. More than two decades previously, in 1948, Allende had criticized the Soviets' restriction of individual liberty and their negation of "rights which we deem inalienable to the human personality." During the intervening years most of his positions were consistent with this assertion. It was only the road to socialism, however, that Allende wanted to

make democratic and institutional. He did not envisage the Chilean people voting exploitative and capitalist institutions back into power. Once "the people" took over in the complete sense, Allende believed that they would continue to rule.

Allende's enemies could truthfully point to many flaws. He fully participated in government by legerdemain and condoned the violation of Chile's liberties, laws and constitution. His propensity to renege on commitments, his willingness to let dirty work be done, his dissembling—all were part of Salvador Allende. But

Allende was also called by some "the First Dreamer of the Republic"; and he dreamed marvelous, soaring dreams. His aspiration was for a better Chile and for happiness and fulfillment for his compatriots. Few people are altogether consistent in outlook, and Salvador Allende revealed more contradictions and anomalies than most. Nonetheless, he was an extraordinary leader and a profoundly impressive human being.

It is true that the Chilean Way led across a sea of troubles. At first high and broad, the road was progressively

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eaten away by turbulent waters, with waves of leftist assault and UP folly undermining one bank as rightist attacks washed at the other. The causeway got narrower and more treacherous, and the prospect ahead more obscure. By the early months of 1973, thinking people could not help but see that the constitutional road to 1976 was crumbling. Nevertheless, Allende and his trusted collaborators could have made wiser decisions. Had they been more resolute, consistent and farsighted they could have faced the necessity of a clear choice of policy and made the commitments essential to it. It might have been painful, but it would not have been impossible.

All this matters because it is important that hopes of social transformation through democracy and law be kept alive if possible, across the spectrum of the left. The Chilean Way was the highest expression we have yet seen of central-core Marxists trying to follow the peaceful road to socialism. Socialism may not be the best or even a good way to order a society's affairs, but the ability of free citizens to choose socialism, or capitalism, or some other economic system is beyond price. Too many people in the world share Allende's socialist convictions for democrats to abandon that aspiration to men with guns who preach bloody revolution as the only road to social justice. Too many of the world's people live out their lives in the dust of poverty, hunger, sickness and ignorance and oppression for democratic socialists to facilitate the task of the totalitarians of the left. It should not be necessary for those who share Salvador Allende's dream to accept the secret policeman's boot on the stairs at night as a necessary price for the achievement of their economic and social values. If the possibility of a Chilean Way should be decisively ruled out for the world's leftists, we would all have reason to be sorry. ■