

September, the cruelest month in Chile

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Landau recalls the 1973 CIA-sponsored coup in Chile that brought to power a military junta, and turned the country into the first laboratory of neoliberalism.

"Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain."

— T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

On September 10, 1810, Chile declared independence from Spain. On September 4, 1970, Chile's Popular Unity coalition of left parties under the leadership of Dr. Salvador Allende won the presidential elections with a plurality of 36.4 percent. On September 11, 1973, Army Chief General Augusto Pinochet led a U.S.-backed military coup that killed Allende and Chilean democracy. The military dictatorship endured for 17 years.

U.S. interference in Chile's elections began in the 1950s and 1960s when the CIA poured money into the right wing opposition. Less than a week after Nixon received the disappointing news about the presidential vote, he decided to annul the Chilean vote. A quote widely attributed to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained Nixon's morality: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

Nixon ordered CIA Director Richard Helms, according to Helms' subsequently published notes, to use violence, economic warfare and whatever else it took to prevent Allende's inauguration and, failing that, to unseat his government. Nixon and Kissinger's sense of "responsibility" meant breaking the law — in the name of "national security."

Following the bloody 9/11/73 coup in Chile, Kissinger eagerly recognized the Pinochet-led coup's illegitimate "junta" and offered it economic aid as well. He also pressured international lending organizations to open their wallets to Pinochet.

The U.S. government has yet to declassify documents related to the role in the coup of U.S. Navy spy ships docked in the Valparaiso harbor — by coincidence? — on September 11. The ships monitored Chilean military phone and radio traffic on the day of the golpe and provided coup organizers with information about units loyal to Allende that might resist; thus, the coup plotters could repress them and avoid civil war.

The coup script also called for Allende to surrender. Since he refused to play his assigned part, the generals ordered Chilean Air Force jets to fire rockets into the Moneda Palace. (Think of the Pentagon 28 years later — only the Chilean pilots did not sacrifice themselves, but flew their military jets to safety!)

The assault on the President's office killed Chilean democracy — and President Allende. The high command of the Chilean armed forces — unlike the fiends who flew commercial aircraft into office buildings and the Pentagon — acted at the behest of “higher powers” in Washington, not in Heaven, although no one should doubt the intensity of U.S. support for the coup.

General Carlos Prats, former Chilean Chief of Staff, identified Lt. Col. Patrick Ryan, a Naval Attaché, as the key U.S. military liaison officer assigned to the coup plotters. (Prats was assassinated in 1974 in Buenos Aires by agents of Pinochet's secret police.) Ryan called the day of the coup “our D-Day.” He described the military operation as “close to perfect.” (Department of Defense, U.S. Milgroup, Situation Report #2, October 1, 1973 [\[1\]](#))

Perfection for Ryan included the reestablishment of “liberty.” In the weeks following the coup, the military dictatorship showed its understanding of liberty: its troops murdered, kidnapped and tortured tens of thousands and forced hundreds of thousands to flee the country. Pinochet's dictatorship endured for 17 years.

Thirty years later, Secretary of State Colin Powell offered sort of an apology: “what happened with Mr. Allende...is not a part of American history that we're proud of.” (Interview on Black Entertainment Television's Youth Town Hall, Feb. 20, 1973)

A typical congressional responses to imperial crimes came in 1975: post mortem hearings about the CIA's role in Chile. In the testimony, the Solons “discovered” that Nixon and Kissinger had ordered the CIA to “destabilize” the Allende government. (United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, a U.S. Senate committee chaired by Senator Frank Church (D-ID).

Sanctimonious Senators and haughty House Members declared their outrage. Yes, once again, the President had broken U.S. laws by conspiring to overthrow governments and kidnap and murder people. This “shocking” behavior occurred just as Congress voted no more funds to continue the Vietnam War where such behavior had become routine.

In one “responsible” gambit, the Agency paid \$50,000 to Patria y Libertad thugs. The extreme right wing “action” group tried to kidnap Army Chief General Rene Schneider, but the abductors shot and killed the General and his chauffeur.

The CIA also organized strikes in strategic sectors of the economy, orchestrated Chilean media propaganda campaigns to smear Allende and paid saboteurs to attack power plants and other infrastructural assets.

The Treasury Department pressured international agencies and foreign “allies” to curtail Chile's foreign credit. “Make the economy scream,” wrote CIA Chief Richard Helms in his notes taken from a meeting with Nixon and Kissinger about what the Agency should do to bring down the Allende government.

Nixon had to resign in 1974, not because of his criminal acts against Chile, but rather for showing his contempt for U.S. laws at home as well. Kissinger, however, continues to receive honorific deference and high consulting fees. In addition, he still gets his pompous commentaries published in leading newspapers. Like Nixon before he died, Kissinger deserves his proper place: in the dock facing charges of war crimes for conspiracy to commit mass murder and other crimes against the people of Chile. (Add to his crimes orders to bomb civilian targets in Vietnam and his support for massive killing in Indonesia. Kissinger represents the obvious dark side of empire — that Metternichian balance to “democracy spreaders” who paint noble intentions over U.S. aggressions.)

Even after four and a half years of war in Iraq, “naïve Members still feign “shock” when confronted by daily illegal behavior. Imagine, the President dares violate the very laws and treaties that state Congress must declare war and outlaws interference in other nations’ destinies! Haven’t they learned the unwritten clause attached to U.S. laws that say they apply to everyone else, not the empire’s rulers. Indeed, how would the empire “punish” naughty — disobedient — nations if it had to abide by such restrictions as non-intervention?

Others count much less. The U.S. media paid little or no attention to the 34th anniversary of Allende’s election, or the military coup in Chile. When TV or print news cover that Andean nation — rarely — reporters often fail to mention the coup and the U.S. role in it. Instead, Chile gets characterized as a “successful democracy,” an example of “free market” success, where neo liberal economics brought economic growth.

Amnesia exists in some Chilean minds as well; not just young people, but those who don’t want to recall the “unpleasantness” of that aberrant period. How long does it take to heal from the trauma of a coup and 17 years of military rule? I asked a Chilean friend.

“I’ll let you know,” he said.

September 18 is Chile’s national day, a week after September 11. Chileans count more dead from their 9/11 than the U.S. does from its trauma — plus the loss of liberties, the constitution, university system and other institutions deemed dangerous by the military plotters. Chileans have recovered some freedom, some confidence in old institutions. Fools anywhere may continue to trust the military to accept its subordinate role, but only idiots will rely on Washington’s repeated assurances that it will obey international law.

The loss of innocence is painful and permanent. Salvador Allende, one of the last true democrats, perished with gun in hand, defending the Constitution, the people’s document.

In his last radio speech, tanks surrounding the Moneda Palace, Allende said: “My words do not have bitterness but disappointment.” He refused to resign. “I will pay for loyalty to the people with my life. And I say to them that I am certain that the seeds which we have planted in the good conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans will not be shriveled forever.”

Allende asked Chile’s workers to grasp the lesson: “foreign capital, imperialism, together with the reaction, created the climate in which the Armed Forces broke their tradition...The people must defend themselves, but they must not sacrifice themselves. The people must not let themselves be destroyed or riddled with bullets, but they cannot be humiliated either...These are my last words, and I am certain that my sacrifice will not be in vain, I am certain that, at the very least, it will be a moral lesson that will punish felony, cowardice, and treason.”

One day, the majority will absorb Allende’s warning.

P.S.

* From Progreso Weekly, 20 September 2007. English version on TNI website.

Footnotes

[1] See: <http://www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv/NSAEBB...>