

Lewis H. Diuguid

Allende's Future

Chilean President Salvador Allende has served just about half of his 6-year term, but his chances of completing it look dimmer now than they did in 1970. Even then there were plenty of skeptics. They pointed out that Allende had won only 36 per cent of the popular vote, that as a Marxist he would be unique in Chile's—and the world's—democratic history, and that his program for socialism was bound to antagonize such anti-Marxist powers abroad as the United States.

Still, there was the proven capacity and flexibility of the Chilean political system. It had, after all, permitted Allende to come to power. Moreover, military intervention did not seem to be a threat in a nation where the soldiers really did keep to barracks.

Santiago was agitated by the impending changes, to be sure. On the one hand, there was euphoria among the Marxists who had sought power so long. On the other, there was panic among the rightists. But a tolerant



By Oscar Berger

skepticism could be found among many between those poles who were willing to wait and see.

In Chile today, tolerance, flexibility and euphoria are as scarce as potatoes and cooking oil. And soldiers are in the streets.

Allende has presided over the polarization of an electorate that just three years ago was still highly diverse. Civil war is a real possibility, and this comes as a shock to Chileans who took pride in their nonviolence.

The basic cause for the crisis is Allende's determination to carry out his program of sweeping change without majority support. The Chilean multi-party system is founded on compromise. It accommodates a minority president, but the parliament is a check against his imposing a program unacceptable to the majority.

Allende, however maintains that to modify his socialism would be to defraud his supporters. And so there is an impasse.

But if Allende's refusal to compromise is the basic cause of the crisis, other factors contribute: the parallel intransigence of the opposition, incapacity in the ruling coalition, and the difficult-to-define foreign factor

The Christian Democratic and National Party opposition has shown as little willingness to compromise as has Allende. It is just that the onus is on Allende as President. They seemed more willing at the outset, when Allende was stronger. They are less so now, when he seems weaker.

Christian Democrats have accommodated to the conservative National Party even as they have deepened the split with the Allende coalition—

though their own ideology is much more akin to the Marxists'.

While both sides have contributed to the crisis through intransigence, Allende's government has itself been a major factor through its incompetence. Many of its leaders concede this freely.

Policies agreed upon at cabinet level and among leaders of the coalition's six parties are diluted or even discarded in the field. The government's chain of command frays into separate hierarchies layered through the ministries by the Communists, the Socialists, and the Christian Left. None trusts the others.

So far, the exigencies of power have not coalesced the Popular Unity coalition. Allende's election was possible because the disparate Marxists at last pulled together for that limited goal.

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As one of them said, "We had a program for election, but not for government."

While Allende proved to be an icy brinksman in conflict with the opposition and in cabinet crises, he has shown a curious inertia when purges of the government ranks were called for.

Incompetents are rarely relieved of responsibility, and almost never fired outright.

A couple years ago, when violence was on the rise in Santiago, a newly arrived reporter asked Allende's press secretary about the possibility of wide conflict. He replied by pulling a .38 caliber pistol from his desk drawer and snarling, "If it comes, we're ready." The Socialist Party stalwart was infamous for such gaffes, but he lost his post only after he left the country in hurried pursuit of his fleeing wife. It got pretty embarrassing for the Allende crowd. Yet the gun-toting secretary is now back on the President's personal staff.

Equivalent cases of old-boy relations among the new Marxists abound in the ministries charged with directing the economy and the critical mining sector. And the inflation and copper problems are the bane of the government's existence.

How big is the U.S. role in the crisis? The Nixon administration's antipathy for this socialist experiment has been clear enough. Allende expected it—his program called for taking over property of influential American corporations.

The U.S. ambassador was negotiating in behalf of the copper companies before any action was taken against them, and the cutoff of American credits began about the same time. ITT's anti-Allende activities received official sympathy if not connivance.

But the United States has made a major de facto contribution to Allende by failing to come to terms on rescheduling Chile's huge debts—on-and-off negotiations have provided a painless two-year moratorium. Minor aid efforts, such as Peace Corps and Food for Peace, continue.

By the public record, it would appear that the U.S. role in the Allende crisis actually is marginal. But it is real, and it rankles those who see no reason for any American involvement. Should he fail, many will wonder if Chile's experiment failed on its own terms.

Allende may weather the crisis. But while the question in 1970 was whether he would be able to carry out his program, it now seems to be whether he can just hold the government together. With the polarization extending now to the armed forces, his room for maneuvering is tight.