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Coup in Chile

Chile's coup is different. Its special tragedy is that it ends Latin America's longest democratic tradition and also its most serious effort to carry out rapid social change within a framework of representative government. Whether the coup will arrest the country's social and economic disintegration, or lead Chile into an intensified class war, cannot yet be known. The leaders of the armed forces, until now on the sidelines of politics, conducted their takeover in the name of "liberating Chile from the Marxist yoke," as they described the elected government of Salvador Allende. At the same time, in an evident bow to the Allende constituency, the military leaders assured the workers that their economic and social benefits "will not suffer fundamental changes." Perhaps the Chilean military can return their country in a reasonable time to its democratic heritage. The experience of others is not encouraging. That is what is so regrettable about the failure of the Allende experiment. It is an outcome likely to harden both Latin left and Latin right in the view that social change in a democratic context doesn't work.

Mr. Allende's truly unfortunate death—by his own hand, according to the new junta—imparts an additional somber and ominous note. Many in Latin America will no doubt regard him as a martyr whose death, like that of Che Guevara, symbolizes the implacability of American "imperialism." His politics, perhaps also his myth, are bound to move to the center of Latin and inter-American politics, and to becloud objective judgment of him. It is impossible not to note, however, that his 30 earlier years in the political wilderness had ill prepared him to exercise power. He ignored the limitations of his minority support and attempted to govern as though he wielded a majority. He lost control of many of his own supporters. His admirers can argue that he was bequeathed a political and economic legacy that would have burdened any leader, but that is hardly a persuasive defense; the job was not forced upon him.

On the eve of Allende's election in 1970, Henry Kissinger, calling him "probably a Communist," said that an "Allende takeover" would pose "massive problems for us, and for democratic forces and for pro-U.S. forces in Latin America." The CIA and ITT discussed —apparently without further action—how to keep Mr. Allende from power. When Chilean moderates seemed to be looking for a satisfactory way to resolve the copper-nationalization disputes, the administration delivered a number of symbolic rebuffs to Mr. Allende and then proceeded to use its influence to deny him access to loans from the international development banks. The evident results were to stiffen the Chilean position on compensation for the copper firms, to work economic hardship on Chile, and to aggravate political tension there. Meanwhile, the U.S. kept up close links with the Chilean military. Military aid flowed; at the moment of the coup, four U.S. Navy ships were steaming toward Chile for joint maneuvers with Chile's navy. In denying CIA involvement in the coup yesterday, the State Department did not offer regrets either for the takeover or for Mr. Allende's death.

Sobering as it is to have to ask whether American ideological coolness and corporate influence played a role in the undoing of the Allende experiment, it is unavoidable. Indeed, the denouement leaves hanging the whole question of what ought to be the American policy toward the forces of economic nationalism churning much of Latin America. The issue is unquestionably worthy of the recall of Secretary of State-designate Kissinger before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for a closer look at our performance in Chile and its implications for future policy, or a separate congressional investigation, or both.