

Spun Off By the Whirlwind

By C. L. Sulzberger

Even though history's whirlwind proved too great for him, there was something appealing about the late Salvador Allende who tried to lead Chile into Marxist Socialism by parliamentary means.

This attempt was hampered by extreme left revolutionary movements as well as conservative forces of the right and center. Together they produced economic chaos. In the end, the President, who had never mustered a popular majority, was crushed.

Allende participated in two Chilean popular-front governments each of which endured three years. The first (1938-1941) produced a new basis for collaboration between middle class and workers' parties. Allende, its Health Minister, already a Socialist, was immensely proud that he introduced free milk for children. The second (1970-1973), just smashed by a military putsch, resembled its predecessor in that neither was able to carry out its full program.

Comparing these experiments, the President once said to me (Santiago, March 23, 1971): "That [first] popular-front regime was on the left of the capitalistic system. But the Popular Unity Government now wants to transform the capitalistic system entirely.

"At that time the leading role in the popular-front government was taken by the Radical party, representing the small bourgeoisie. Now the leading role is not bourgeois at all. This time the President, myself, is a Socialist and not a radical."

Allende was very much a political animal, a small, stocky, quick-moving man with grey mustache, ruddy face, thick, heavily rimmed spectacles. He

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was unique in his effort to achieve full revolution on a relatively slow-motion, democratic basis and it is arguable that the latter restrictions, which added left-wing impatience to right-wing rage, made his ultimate downfall inevitable. He boasted:

"In thirty years' political life I never failed to do what I said I would do. It could be possible that the dynamic of events might eventually create a revolutionary party, one party of the revolution" (containing the Socialist, Communist and radical elements which backed him).

"But this is not possible for the imminent future. After all, the Socialists don't want to be changed and the radicals, who in Chile have had a party for 110 years, surely won't commit suicide. Don't forget that Karl Marx foresaw a time when there would be no governments at all. But when? It hasn't come yet.

"The strategy of Socialism must depend on the realities of any country where it is attempted. To be a Socialist is obviously not the same thing as being a Communist. There are different roads to Socialism."

Allende insisted his credo would never restrict basic freedoms. He said: "My word is formally engaged to respect all the fundamental rights of man. No matter how extensive our economic and social reform will be, we will not only respect human rights but actually increase them. Human rights are not merely political; they are also social and economic."

He promised he would never allow any foreign power to exert influence over Chilean sovereignty or to establish bases that could be used against the United States. But many of his actions were clearly hostile to the U.S.A. and its interests. He never excluded the chance that violent confrontation might smash his program.

"Sadly, very sadly, I admit this possibility exists," the President told me. "That is the lesson of history. I know it would come from the right because it has already done something that never before occurred in Chilean history—namely, assassinated the army commander. There have already been two attempts on my life."

Nevertheless, he boasted that certain of his accomplishments were indelible. "If I were to die tomorrow," he said, "no one in Chile would ever dare to abolish the system I instituted of giving every child free milk. No one would ever attempt to end our system of social security. No one would dream of taking away from illiterate citizens the right to vote which they have been legally granted."

Chileans are an orderly people and less subject than most South Americans to armed coups. One may hope the junta that ousted Allende will restrain its obvious prejudices in favor of the right and will seek to incorporate into any new regime some of the beneficial reforms of the old, while tempering economic socialism with social democracy. This would be a suitable monument to the late President whose aims were revolutionary but whose means were intended to be moderate.