United States Senate, Covert Action in Chile, 1963-1973

Staff Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities, 94th Congress 1st Session, December 18, 1975 (excerpt)

III. Major Covert Action Programs and Their Effects.

This section outlines the major programs of covert action undertaken by the United States in Chile, period by period. In every instance, covert action was an instrument of United States foreign policy, decided upon at the highest levels of the government. Each subsection to follow sets forth that policy context. Without it, it is impossible to understand the covert actions which were undertaken. After a discussion of policy, each subsection elaborates the covert action tactics employed in each case. Finally, the effect of each major program is assessed.

The section begins with the first major United States covert action in Chile - the 1964 presidential elections.

A. The 1964 Presidential Election.

1. United States Policy

The United States was involved on a massive scale in the 1964 presidential election in Chile. The Special Group authorized over three million dollars during the 1962-64 period to prevent the election of a Socialist or Communist candidate. A total of nearly four million dollars was spent on some fifteen covert action projects, ranging from organizing slum dwellers to passing funds to political parties.

The goal, broadly, was to prevent or minimize the influence of Chilean Communists or Marxists in the government that would emerge from the 1964 election. Consequently, the U.S. sought the most effective way of opposing FRAP (Popular Action Front), an alliance of Chilean Socialists, Communists, and several miniscule non-Marxist parties of the left which backed the candidacy of Salvador Allende. Specifically, the policy called for support of the Christian Democratic Party, the Democratic Front (a coalition of rightist parties), and a variety of anti-communist propaganda and organizing activities.

The groundwork for the election was laid early in 1961 by establishing operational relationships with key political parties and by creating propaganda and organizational mechanisms capable of influencing key sectors of the population. Projects that had been conducted since the 1950’s among peasants, slum dwellers, organized labor, students and the media provided a basis for much of the pre-election covert action.

The main problem facing the United States two years before the election was the selection of a party and/or candidate to support against the leftist alliance. The CIA presented two papers to the Special Group on April 2, 1962. One of these papers proposed support for the Christian Democratic Party, while the other recommended support of the Radical Party, a group to the right of the Christian Democrats. The Special Group approved both proposals. Although this strategy appears to have begun as an effort to hedge bets and support two candidates for President, it evolved into a strategy designed to support the Christian Democratic candidate.

On August 27, 1962, the Special Group approved the use of a third-country funding channel and authorized $180,000 in fiscal year 1969 for the Chilean Christian Democrats. The Kennedy Administration had preferred a center-right government in Chile, consisting of the Radicals on the right and the Christian Democrats in the center. However, political events in Chile in 1962-1969 - principally the creation of a right-wing alliance that included the Radical Party - precluded such a coalition.

Consequently, throughout 1963, the United States funded both the Christian Democrats and the right-wing coalition, the Democratic Front.

After a by-election defeat in May 1964 destroyed the Democratic Front, the U.S. threw its support fully behind the Christian Democratic candidate. However, CIA funds continued to subsidize the Radical Party
candidate in order to enhance the Christian Democrats’ image as a moderate progressive party being attacked from the right as well as the left.

2. Covert Action Techniques

Covert action during the 1964 campaign was composed of two major elements. One was direct financial support of the Christian Democratic campaign. The CIA underwrote slightly more than half of the total cost of that campaign. After debate, the Special Group decided not to inform the Christian Democratic candidate, Eduardo Frei, of American covert support of his campaign. A number of intermediaries were therefore mobilized to pass the money to the Christian Democrats.

In addition to the subsidies for the Christian Democratic Party, the Special Group allocated funds to the Radical Party and to private citizens’ groups. In addition to support for political parties, the CIA mounted a massive anti-communist propaganda campaign. Extensive use was made of the press, radio, films, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, direct mailings, paper streamers, and wall painting. It was a “scare campaign,” which relied heavily on images of Soviet tanks and Cuban firing squads and was directed especially to women. Hundreds of thousands of copies of the anti-communist pastoral letter of Pope Pius XI were distributed by Christian Democratic organizations. They carried the designation, “printed privately by citizens without political affiliation, in order more broadly to disseminate its content.” “Disinformation” and “black propaganda” - material which purported to originate from another source, such as the Chilean Communist Party- were used as well.

The propaganda campaign was enormous. During the first week of intensive propaganda activity (the third week of June 1964), a CIA-funded propaganda group produced twenty radio spots per day in Santiago and on 44 provincial stations; twelve-minute news broadcasts five time daily on three Santiago stations and 24 provincial outlets; thousands of cartoons, and much paid press advertising. By the end of June, the group produced 24 daily newscasts in Santiago and the provinces, 26 weekly “commentary” programs, and distributed 3,000 posters daily. The CIA regards the anti-communist scare campaign as the most effective activity undertaken by the U.S. on behalf of the Christian Democratic candidate.

The propaganda campaign was conducted internationally as well, and articles from abroad were "replayed" in Chile. Chilean newspapers reported: an endorsement of Frei by the sister of a Latin American leader, a public letter from a former president in exile in the U.S., a “message from the women of Venezuela,” and dire warnings about an Allende victory from various figures in military governments in Latin America.

The CIA ran political action operations independent of the Christian Democrats' campaign in a number of important voter blocks, including slum dwellers, peasants, organized labor and dissident Socialists. Support was given to “anti-communist” members of the Radical Party in their efforts to achieve positions of influence in the party hierarchy, and to prevent the party from throwing its support behind Allende.


To manage the election effort, an electoral committee was established in Washington, consisting of the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas Mann; the Western Hemisphere Division Chief of the CIA, Desmond Fitzgerald; Ralph Dungan and McGeorge Bundy from the White House; and the Chief of the Western Hemisphere Division Branch Four, the branch that has jurisdiction over Chile. This group was in close touch with the State Department Office of Bolivian and Chilean Affairs. In Santiago there was a parallel Election Committee that coordinated U.S. efforts. It included the Deputy Chief of Mission, the CIA Chief of Station, and the heads of the Political and Economic Sections, as well as the Ambassador. The Election Committee in Washington coordinated lines to higher authority and to the field and other agencies. No special task force was established. and the CIA Station in Santiago was temporarily increased by only three officers.

4. Role of Multinational Corporations

A group of American businessmen in Chile offered to provide one and a half million dollars to be administered and disbursed covertly by the U.S. Government to prevent Allende from winning the 1964 presidential election. This offer went to the 303 Committee (the name of the Special Group after June 1964)
which decided not to accept the offer. It decided that offers from American business could not be accepted, that they were neither a secure way nor an honorable way of doing business. This decision was a declaration of policy which set the precedent for refusing to accept such collaboration between CIA and private business. However, CIA money represented as private money, was passed to the Christian Democrats through a private businessman.

5. Role of the Chilean Military

On July 19, 1964, the Chilean Defense Council, which is the equivalent of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, went to President Alessandri to propose a coup d'état if Allende won. This offer was transmitted to the CIA Chief of Station, who told the Chilean Defense Council through an intermediary that the United States was absolutely opposed to a coup. On July 20, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy was approached by a Chilean Air Force general who threatened a coup if Allende won. The DCM reproached him for proposing a coup d'état and there was no further mention of it. Earlier, the CIA learned that the Radical candidate for election, several other Chileans, and an ex-politician from another Latin American country had met on June 2 to organize a rightist group called the Legion of Liberty. They said this group would stage a coup d'état if Allende won, or if Frei won and sought a coalition government with the Communist Party. Two of the Chileans at the meeting reported that some military officers wanted to stage a coup d'état before the election if the United States Government would promise to support it. Those approaches were rebuffed by the CIA.

6. Effects of Covert Action

A CIA study concludes that U.S. intervention enabled Eduardo Frei to win a clear majority in the 1964 election, instead of merely a plurality. What U.S. Government documents do not make clear is why it was necessary to assure a majority, instead of accepting the victory a plurality would have assured. CIA assistance enabled the Christian Democratic Party to establish an extensive organization at the neighborhood and village level. That may have lent grassroots support for reformist efforts that the Frei government undertook over the next several years.

Some of the propaganda and polling mechanisms developed for use in 1964 were used repeatedly thereafter, in local and congressional campaigns, during the 1970 presidential campaign, and throughout the 1970-1973 Allende presidency. Allegations of CIA involvement in the campaign, and press allegations of CIA funding of the International Development Foundation contributed to the U.S. reluctance in 1970 to undertake another massive pre-election effort.


During the years between the election of Christian Democratic President Eduardo Frei in 1964 and the presidential election campaign of 1970 the CIA conducted a variety of covert activities in Chile. Operating within different sectors of society, these activities were all intended to strengthen groups which supported President Frei and opposed Marxist influences.

The CIA spent a total of almost $2 million on covert action in Chile during this period, of which one-fourth was covered by 40 Committee authorizations for specific major political action efforts. The CIA conducted twenty covert action projects in Chile during these years.

1. Covert Action Methods

In February 1965 the 303 Committee approved $175,000 for a short-term political action project to provide covert support to selected candidates in the March 1965 congressional elections in Chile. According to the CIA, twenty-two candidates were selected by the Station and the Ambassador; nine were ejected. The operation helped defeat up to 13 FRAP candidates who would otherwise have won congressional seats.

Another election effort was authorized in July 1968, in preparation for the March 1969 congressional election. The 40 Committee authorized $350,000 for this effort, with the objective of strengthening
moderate political forces before the 1970 presidential election. The program consisted of providing financial support to candidates, supporting a splinter Socialist Party in order to attract votes away from Allende's socialist party, propaganda activities, and assisting independent groups. The CIA regarded the election effort as successful in meeting its limited objective; ten of the twelve candidates selected for support won their races, including one very unexpected victory. The support provided to the dissident socialist group deprived the Socialist Party of a minimum of seven congressional seats.

The 303 Committee also approved $30,000 in 1967 to strengthen the right wing of the Radical Party.

A number of other political actions not requiring 303 Committee approval were conducted. The project to increase the effectiveness and appeal of the Christian Democratic Party and to subsidize the party during the 1964 elections continued into late 1965 or 1966, as did a project to influence key members of the Socialist Party toward orthodox European socialism and away from communism. During this period, the CIA dealt with a Chilean official at the cabinet level, though with scant result.

Covert action efforts were conducted during this period to influence the political development of various sectors of Chilean society. One project, conducted prior to the 1964 elections to strengthen Christian Democratic support among peasants and slum dwellers, continued to help train and organize "anti-communists" in these and other sectors until public exposure of CIA funding in 1967 forced its termination. A project to compete organizationally with the Marxists among the urban poor of Santiago was initiated shortly after the 1964 election, and was terminated in mid-1969 because the principal agent was unwilling to prejudice the independent posture of the organization by using it on a large scale to deliver votes in the 1969 and 1970 presidential elections. In the mid-1960's, the CIA supported an anti-communist women's group active in Chilean political and intellectual life.

Two projects worked within organized labor in Chile. One, which began during the 1964 election period, was a labor action project to combat the communist-dominated Central Unica de Trabajadores Chilenos (CUTCh) and to support democratic labor groups. Another project was conducted in the Catholic labor field.

Various CIA projects during this period supported media efforts. One, begun in the early 1950's, operated wire services. Another, which was an important part of the 1964 election effort, supported anti-communist propaganda activities through wall posters attributed to fictitious groups, leaflet campaigns, and public heckling.

A third project supported a right-wing weekly newspaper, which was an instrument of the anti-Allende campaign during and for a time after the 1970 election campaign. Another project funded an asset who produced regular radio political commentary shows attacking the political parties on the left and supporting CIA selected candidates. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, this asset organized a march on the Soviet Embassy which led to major police action and mass media coverage. Other assets funded under this project placed CIA-inspired editorials almost daily in El Mercurio, Chile's major newspaper and, after 1968, exerted substantial control over the content of that paper's international news section.

The CIA also maintained covert liaison relations with Chile's internal security and intelligence services, civilian and military. The primary purpose of these arrangements was to enable the Chilean services to assist CIA in information collection about foreign targets. A subsidiary purpose of these relationships was to collect information and meet the threat posed by communists and other groups of the far left within Chile.

2. Effects Of Covert Action

The CIA's evaluations of the 1965 and 1969 election projects suggest that those efforts were relatively successful in achieving their immediate goals. On the other hand, the labor and "community development" projects were deemed rather unsuccessful in countering the growth of strong leftist sentiment and organization among workers, peasants and slum dwellers. For instance, neither of the labor projects was able to find a nucleus of legitimate Chilean labor leaders to compete effectively with the communist-dominated CUTCh.

The propaganda projects probably had a substantial cumulative effect over these years, both in helping to polarize public opinion concerning the nature of the threat posed by communists and other leftists, and in maintaining an extensive propaganda capability. Propaganda mechanisms developed during the 1960's were
ready to be used in the 1970 election campaign. At the same time, however, in a country where nationalism, "economic independence" and "anti-imperialism" claimed almost universal support, the persistent allegations that the Christian Democrats and other parties of the center and right were linked to the CIA may have played a part in undercutting popular support for them.