Introduction

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the United States transformed itself from a dominant regional into a competitive global power, all the while projecting its power abroad driven less by a desire "to make the world safe for democracy" than to put down nationalist threats to an expanding U.S. capital and commerce. Throughout the Cold War era, the gap between idealistic rhetoric and policy practice showed no signs of closing: the verbal commitment to promoting democracy by American presidents "with few exceptions . . . was distinctly secondary to the U.S. quest for private economic opportunity and public support for military-dominated regimes that would maintain order."[1]

Between 1898 and 1933, the principal objective of U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere – based on repeated military interventions and economic pressures – was to create a gaggle of client regimes in Central America and the Caribbean, which culminated in Franklin Roosevelt's announcement of a Good Neighbor Policy. From then on, through the end of the 1950s, Washington's policy toward Latin America gave priority to establishing a "closed economy in an open world." Politically, this translated into supporting "dependable *and weak*" anticommunist regimes, irrespective of their origins or how they ruled.[2] In pursuit of

[1] Walter Lafeber, "The Tension between Democracy and Capitalism during the American Century," in *The Ambiguous Legacy*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172. Also see Peter L. Hahn and May Ann Heiss, eds., *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001).

[2] David Green, *The Containment of Latin America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 296 (emphasis original).

this overarching objective, successive administrations approved of, and accommodated, both "stability" achieved within a democratic context and "stability" imposed by brutal, autocratic governments. During the 1960s and early 1970s, maximum flexibility became the justification for diplomatic recognition of armed forces' illegal seizures of power.[3] Starting with the Kennedy administration's approval of the January 1961 military coup in El Salvador, U.S. support for democracy in Latin America, in other words, remained selective and contingent rather than universal and principled.

By the end of the 1960s, the failure of the multibillion dollar Alliance for Progress aid program to satisfy popular expectations of social and economic change triggered a new cycle of nationalist unrest. Featuring a distinct anti–foreign capital, anti-U.S. tinge, political and military forces advocating greater national control over economic resources, and intent on transforming or redefining relations with Washington, assumed power in Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. Additionally, formidable nationalist movements began to emerge in Argentina and Uruguay. Allende's Chile represented the focal point of the new nationalist challenge. Its tentative efforts to move out of the capitalist orbit and its support of ideological pluralism weakened the ties between North and South and directly challenged Washington's ability to secure the continent economically for American interests.

Not surprisingly, as the Vietnam War was drawing to a close, the United States began to refocus its attention on what became a sustained effort to reconsolidate its power and influence 'south of the border.' The Nixon administration moved aggressively to confront perceived 'hostile' governments, utilizing both outsider and insider strategies: economic sanctions complemented political pressures and/or covert operations to either deradicalize or destabilize these regimes. Where regime change was the objective, Washington sought to enlist the support of key state institutions and groups in civil society willing to collaborate in achieving this outcome. At the same time, Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, global conflict with the Soviet Union and its allies "impelled us to maintain a constructive relationship with authoritarian [and anticommunist] regimes of South America."[4] There was no interest in actively promoting a

[3] See James Cochrane, "U.S. Policy toward Recognition of Governments and Promotion of Democracy in Latin America since 1963," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 4, no. 2 (1972): 275–291.

[4] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 754.

strategic shift away from a hemisphere dominated by military regimes to one where democracies flourished. On the contrary, Nixon had enunciated the approach he would adopt early in his tenure: "We must deal realistically with governments in the Inter-American System as they are."[5]

Resurgent Nationalism: Allende's Challenge and Washington's Response

If the 1959 Cuban Revolution had drawn attention to the potential for revolutionary upheaval in Latin America, the September 1970 election of a Socialist-Communist party coalition to political power in Chile – Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, UP) – was proof that a Marxist-oriented program of national development could capture the popular imagination and be enacted in a much more conventional fashion. To the United States, a revolution via the ballot box implied the kind of broad-based support that was harder to counter than a guerrilla insurgency, and its democratic origins restricted what means were available to challenge its legitimacy. As well, Chile was a relatively well developed country by Latin American standards and had never descended into the kind of corrupt American satrapy that characterized Cuba prior to the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship. For both reasons, the success of a revolution in Chile had wider implications than Cuba's challenge and raised the prospect of a powerful demonstration effect throughout the region – if not beyond. That was certainly Nixon's perception, clearly articulated during a meeting with Mexico's President, Luis Echeverría, in June 1972. It would be "very detrimental to all of us," Nixon confided to his guest, to have "the Chilean experiment spread through the rest of the continent" and, likening communism to a "poison," he added that in the event of its spread, "it inevitably will infect the United States."[6]

The most senior foreign policy adviser to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford had an even more inflated view of the contagion effect of outcomes such as Allende's victory in Chile. "It is hard to imagine," Henry Kissinger told a group of U.S. Ambassadors stationed in European capitals, in December 1975, "that if one or the other of these [Communist parties] takes control of a Western government, it will permit the democratic

[5] Quoted in Cochrane, "U.S. Policy toward Recognition of Governments," 282.
[6] Transcript of conversation between President Nixon, Mexican President Luis Echeverría Alvarez, and Alexander Haig Jr., June 15, 1972, Conservation no. 735-1, Cassette Numbers 2246–2248, Oval Office, White House, The Nixon Tapes, NSA.

process to operate and thereby face the possibility that it may itself be removed from office."[7] That Nixon and Kissinger were willing to undermine elected governments and work with autocratic regimes as part of their overarching strategic vision reflected not only their contingent attitude toward democracy but also a preoccupation with "the limits of US power" – the driving force behind superpower détente – which demanded a search for alternatives to direct military intervention that would maintain a region (Latin America) firmly within Washington's sphere of influence.[8]

Returning from leave just days after the Chilean election, a senior State Department official encountered a White House that "had gone ape about this – ape. They were frantic, just besides themselves."[9] Nixon denounced Allende's victory at a meeting with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Richard Helms and Kissinger and instructed the head of the covert agency "to prevent Allende from coming to power or to unseat him by whatever means possible."[10] A similarly apoplectic National Security Council (NSC) Adviser conjured up the specter of dramatic regional consequences for the United States if the vote was allowed to stand.[11]

With the failure of a two-track political-military attempt to prevent Allende's inauguration,[12] the Nixon White House redoubled its efforts to make certain that a government it viewed as profoundly antagonistic to U.S. interests in Chile, in Latin America, and globally did not complete its six-year term of office. When Nixon and his senior foreign policy officials gathered to discuss the "crisis," Undersecretary of State John Irwin addressed the question of tactics. Regime change "could only be achieved in collaboration with internal forces opposed to the new government given the limits on our capability to do it [alone]."[13] Over the

[7] Reprinted in Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 628.
[8] Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 145.
[9] John Hugh Crimmins interview, FAOHC.
[10] Quoted in U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 94th Cong., 2d Sess., Report 94-465, November 20, 1975, 227, 228.
[11] See Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 665–670; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 376; Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 323.
[12] See U.S. Congress, Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 229–254.
[13] Memo of Conversation, NSC Meeting–Chile (NSSM 97), November 6, 1970, NSC Institutional "H" Files, Minutes of Meetings (1969–1974), Folder: NSC Minutes Originals 1970 [1 of 3], Box H-109, NPMS.

next three years, the White House elaborated a multitrack strategy to destabilize and topple the elected UP government from power: an outsider strategy targeting an economy highly dependent on access to short- and long-term sources of foreign funding, especially from U.S. public and private sources, the major U.S.-influenced global lending agencies, and American-origin spare parts needed to maintain its industrial-agriculture infrastructure in optimal working order; and an insider political/covert strategy designed to create a level of political and economic chaos that would induce the armed forces to intervene and terminate the democratic socialist experiment.[14]

The September 1973 coup shattered Chile's democratic tradition and set the stage for an ambitious rightist revolution based on repression and terror. The President and his NSC Adviser were euphoric over Allende's demise, congratulating themselves on their covert role in "help[ing] [to] create the conditions as great as possible" for the coup to succeed.[15] Once the United States had extended official recognition, the junta, headed by army General Augusto Pinochet, accelerated efforts to systematically eliminate all real and perceived opponents. To the extent that the Nixon White House exhibited any concern about the scope and intensity of this state-authored repression, it centered on the generals' failure to comprehend the problem this posed for administration efforts to get a more sympathetic hearing from Congress when it came to military and economic aid requests for Chile.

Gerald Ford had barely moved into the Oval Office when the subject of Chile arose in a top secret State Department briefing paper, which concluded it was "clearly" in America's interests to maintain a positive relationship, especially taking into account the lack of any "acceptable alternative" to rule by the generals.[16] But with momentum on Capitol Hill moving in favor of those legislators opposed to economic and military aid to Chile, there was growing sentiment among State Department officials in favor of a more pro-active approach to dealing with Third World

[14] On the U.S. economic blockade, see James Petras and Morris Morley, *The United States and Chile: Imperialism and the Overthrow of the Allende Government* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). For an overall analysis of U.S. policy toward the Allende government, see ibid. and Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*, updated ed. (New York: New Press, 2013), 79–115.

[15] Telcon, Nixon to Kissinger, September 16, 1973, Digital NSA.

[16] Briefing Paper, Department of State, "Latin America and Human Rights," August 17, 1974, attached to Memo, NSC, Davis to Kennedy et al., August 19, 1974, NSA, NSC Latin American Affairs Staff: Files, 1974–1977; Folder: President Ford-Briefings, August–September 1974, Box 11, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

recipients who were major human rights abusers amid a concern that, otherwise, "Congress would take the matter out of the Department's hands."[17] Appointed Secretary of State in September 1973, Kissinger blustered that allowing legislators to dictate U.S. policy toward Chile could trigger falling dominos across Asia and a profound weakening of America's global position.[18]

By early 1975, the Ford White House was forced to acknowledge that a reluctance to censure or find serious fault with the junta's method of rule was not producing the sought-after results, above all, congressional approval for adequate funding of a Chilean economy in serious trouble and an end to the country's pariah status within the international community. With the political left decimated, physically and organizationally, the Christian Democrats disoriented, and the regime's hold on power uncontested, Kissinger decided that the most immediate and pressing task was to improve the credibility of the administration's policy. This led to a mild tactical shift from uncritical support of the military regime to selective statements of disapproval about specific abuses perpetrated by the Chilean security forces. But Kissinger still rejected the notion "that human rights interests *per se* outweighed other US interests and objectives in Chile," even as he conceded that Chile's record constituted a major obstacle to achieving these "interests and objectives."[19]

In June 1976, Kissinger arrived in Santiago to address an Organization of American States (OAS) conference. At a much anticipated prior meeting with Pinochet, the Secretary went out of his way to allay any fears the dictator might have harbored that Chile would be subjected to a major dressing down over the junta's human rights performance. In so many words, he told his host that none of the critical remarks in his speech should be taken seriously – that they were nothing more than a sop to American domestic opponents of the regime and did not reflect his views or those of the Ford administration: "The speech is not aimed at Chile . . . *but we have a practical problem we have to take into account*."[20]

Three months later, the "practical problem" reached new heights: the targeted assassination of one of the most influential Chilean critics of the

[17] Quoted in Patrick Breslin, "Human Rights: Rhetoric or Action?," *WP*, February 27, 1977, C4.
[18] Transcript, DOS, The Secretary's Principals and Regionals Staff Meeting, December 23, 1974, Digital NSA.
[19] Telegram, Kissinger to Popper, June 20, 1975, ibid.
[20] Memo of Conversation, Kissinger, Pinochet, Carvajal, Rogers et al., Santiago, June 8, 1976, DOS/FOIAe, III (our emphasis).

Pinochet regime, former Allende government Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier, and his American colleague Ronni Moffitt, in a car bombing in downtown Washington, D.C., only blocks from the White House. Carried out by agents and accomplices of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (Directorate for National Intelligence, DINA), Chile's security organization, it was part of Pinochet's Operation Condor, a program to wage war against prominent Chilean exiles – civilian and military – seeking to mobilize international opposition to the authoritarian regime.[21] As the Ford administration prepared to leave office, U.S. Ambassador to Chile David Popper characterized bilateral relations as "difficult, formal, and largely static."[22]

Carter, Latin America, and Chile

Well before Jimmy Carter took office in January 1977, the combined effects of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the Nixon-Kissinger role in toppling Chile's democratic government, and revelations about U.S. covert operations abroad under the guise of national security had exhausted the electorate's tolerance for an interventionist foreign policy – particularly one justified in terms of countering Soviet activities wherever they might be said to occur in the Third World. Congressional reaction to the arrogant abuse of foreign policy powers had already produced legislative restrictions on executive branch prerogatives in this area, and the public outcry at the exposure of those same excesses meant that any new administration would have to exercise great caution in what latitude remained to pursue U.S. interests abroad or risk once again stoking domestic political opposition. To the incoming President, the lesson was clear: the days of the unrestrained projection of American power abroad were over.

The Carter White House thus confronted the challenge of how to relegitimate American foreign policy domestically and internationally. Beginning with his inaugural address, Carter repeatedly emphasized a connection between a nation's (military) strength and a foreign policy that was always "strongest and most effective when [it emphasized] morality

[21] See Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*, 331–363; John Dinges, *The Condor Years* (New York: New Press, 2004).

[22] Telegram, Popper to Kissinger, January 28, 1977, DOS/FOIAe, I; Telegram, Popper to Kissinger, January 18, 1977, Chile Human Rights Documents, File: DOS, Human Rights in Chile, Vol. 20, Folder 1, Box 12, NA.

and a commitment to freedom and democracy."[23] His critique of Nixon-Ford was not that they had been less than vigorous in promoting U.S. interests but that at times they had misconstrued what these interests were, deceived the American people about how they were pursuing them, and acted in ways that undermined confidence at home and abroad in the U.S. commitment to the values it claimed to champion. The new President bemoaned the "inordinate fear of communism" that had seen the United States "willing to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our own values for theirs."[24] Carter, in other words, was determined to break with the realpolitik of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger era and to substitute for secret diplomacy, covert politics, and automatic support for authoritarian anticommunist regimes an ideology of morality based on the pursuit of human rights. Yet, this commitment to human rights was never as "absolute" or principled as the President insisted it would be in his inaugural address. It was conceptually flawed in seeking to separate the behavior of the regime from the nature of the regime. Instead of challenging the origins or legitimacy of repressive allied regimes, it focused primarily on their methods of governance.[25] As well, the administration made "ample use" of the "extraordinary circumstances" clauses written into human rights legislation ("loopholes") to minimize or circumvent aid cutbacks.[26]

One of the transition option papers prepared by the State and Defense departments for the President-elect defined the "fundamental question" to be addressed in devising policy toward Latin America as "how best to protect and advance U.S. interests and values in a situation of growing estrangement and waning U.S. hegemony."[27] What priority democracy and human rights would be accorded in implementing this approach was far from clear. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher insisted

[23] Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith* (London: Collins, 1982), 142. Also see Jimmy Carter, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977, American Presidency Project.

[24] Jimmy Carter, Commencement Day Speech at Notre Dame University, May 22, 1977, ibid.

[25] For a comprehensive analysis of Carter's regional human rights policy, see Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[26] David Carleton and Michael Stohl, "The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan," *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1985): 216.

[27] State and Defense Transition Options Papers, Volume 2, "The U.S. and Latin America," November 1976, Plains File, Subject File, Folder: Transition: State and Defense Options Papers [3], 11/76, Box 41, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, GA.

that human rights "will be woven, we are determined, into the fabric of American foreign policy."[28] In a major speech at the University of Georgia in April 1977, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance provided a detailed exposition of the administration's human rights policy, reiterating the emphasis on specific techniques of governing, not on questions of regime origins or legitimacy. Brutal or autocratic rulers would never be opposed on the grounds of their essential nature. Vance underlined the importance of pursuing human rights in a "realistic" and calculated fashion based on each particular case, the possibilities for taking "effective action," and its impact on national security interests.[29] This, he later wrote, could best be achieved through "quiet diplomacy."[30] To a senior colleague, it appeared to differ little, if at all, from the Kissinger position: "to wit, you're much better off if you are quiet on the subject and put pressure on behind the scenes."[31] In retrospect, however, a number of department officials concluded that the administration never resolved how this would happen because the policy was "never really set down, thought out and planned"[32] and that even the President himself "never really" understood what it meant.[33]

If the core Carter White House message was that the United States would no longer turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in its relations with other governments, the idea developed few strong roots in the foreign policy bureaucracy. Treasury adhered to the policy but did so only grudgingly whenever it determined Washington's position on multilateral development bank (MDB) loans,[34] Commerce resisted any attempts to link human rights and trade in ways that might threaten U.S. access to export markets, and the Pentagon traditionally opposed any foreign policy 'innovation' that threatened weapons transfers to Third World armed forces and, by extension, reduced its influence with their officer corps. At the middle and lower rungs of the State Department, there was a good deal of disagreement about the interpretation and application of

[28] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Foreign Assistance, *Human Rights*, 95th Cong., 1st Sess., March 4, 7, 1977, 62.
[29] Vance Speech on Law Day before the University of Georgia's Law School, April 30, 1977, DOSB, May 23, 1977, 505–508.
[30] Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 46.
[31] Interview with James M. Wilson Jr.
[32] U.S. Ambassador to the UN Andrew Young, quoted in David S. Broder, "Pushing Human Rights: To What Consequence?," *WP*, June 15, 1977, 17.
[33] Interview with Stephen Cohen.
[34] For convenience, the terms *multilateral development bank* (MDB) and *international financial institution* (IFI) are used interchangeably.

the policy between the career foreign service officers in the geographic bureaus and the mainly political appointees located in the newly elevated Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (HA), a number of whom were recruited from Congress, where they had worked on legislation restricting economic and military aid to countries with lamentable records in this area.[35]

Throughout his run for the White House, Carter appeared to single out Chile for special attention in his critique of U.S. foreign policy during the Nixon-Ford era. In the second campaign debate, he repeated his charge that U.S. policy toward Chile – its role in the "destruction" of a democratic government and "strong support" of a military dictatorship – had failed to reflect American values.[36] While these comments were essentially directed at past U.S. policy, they raised expectations of a significant shift in America's relations with the Pinochet regime. Such optimism was reinforced by the absence of any overriding threats to U.S. interests, which meant that Chile posed a fairly 'no loss' target of Carter's commitment to human rights.

At the outset of his presidency, U.S.-Chilean relations ranked far from the top of Carter's list of hemisphere concerns. Nonetheless, he did put an end to his predecessors' cozy relationship with Pinochet, but the alternative he offered did not encapsulate a commitment to redemocratization in Chile. NSC official David Aaron recalled, "We weren't going to try to overthrow Pinochet. As far as the Carter White House was concerned the focus was on human rights abuses. There were no plans of how you get to democracy."[37]

After January 1977, economic aid programs to Chile were terminated, military relations were scaled back, and U.S. officials began opposing Chilean loan requests to the MDBs. Simultaneously, Carter officials embarked on a combined public and private diplomatic offensive to embarrass the Pinochet regime over its style of governance and, for the first time since the coup, opened up lines of communication with prominent opposition leaders, at the very least acknowledging that they had legitimate grievances and ambitions. But these meetings were not intended

[35] On the conflict between HA and the geographic bureaus, see Caleb Rossiter, *Human Rights: The Carter Record, the Reagan Reaction* (Washington, DC: Center for International Policy, 1984).

[36] Transcript, "The Second [Presidential] Debate, San Francisco, October 6, 1976," in *The Great Debates*, ed. Sidney Kraus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 480.

[37] Telephone interview with David L. Aaron.