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FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE WAR OF THE PACIFIC

At a banquet in Valparaíso in 1852 the Argentine publicist Juan Bautista Alberdi proposed a toast to 'the honourable exception in South America'. In one very important respect, the story of nineteenth century Chile was, it is true, a striking exception to the normal Spanish American pattern. Within fifteen years of independence Chilean politicians were constructing a system of constitutional government which was to prove remarkable (by European as well as Latin American standards) for its durability and adaptability. This successful consolidation of an effective national state excited the envious admiration of less fortunate Spanish American republics, torn and plagued as so many of them were by recurrent strife and caudillo rule. A good part of the explanation of Chile's unusual record undoubtedly lies in what can best be called the 'manageability' of the country at the time of independence, not least in terms of the basic factors of territory and population. The effective national territory of Chile in the 1820s was much smaller than it is today. Its distinctive slenderness of width -- 'a sword hanging from the west side of America' – was for obvious orographical reasons no different; but lengthways no more than 700 miles or so separated the mining districts in the desert around Copiapó, at the northern limit of settlement (27°S), from the green and fertile lands along the Bío-Bío river in the south (37°S) – the area traditionally referred to as the Frontier, beyond which the Araucanian Indians stubbornly preserved their independent way of life. The peripheral clusters of population which lay still further south, at Valdivia and on the densely-forested island of Chiloé (liberated from the Spaniards only in 1826), were remote, insignificant appendages of the republic; the same could also be said slightly later on of the struggling settlement on the Straits of Magellan established in 1843 and used as a penal colony. Leaving aside the Araucanians, who numbered perhaps

200,000, the population of Chile was still fairly small: it rose slowly from an estimated 1,000,000 at the time of independence to an official (and possibly conservative) figure of 2,076,000 in 1875. The overwhelming majority of Chileans lived and worked in the country's traditional heartland, in (or very close to) the central valley extending three hundred miles southwards from Santiago. By the standards of Argentina or Mexico, of Peru or New Granada, this was a very compact territory inhabited by a compact population.

It was in many ways a homogeneous population. Both ethnically and socially the colonial past had left indelible marks. North of the Bío-Bío, few if any Indians survived in separate communities. The tiny black and mulatto trace in the community seems to have vanished within two or three decades of the abolition of slavery (1823). Republican Chile was essentially a country in which a small creole upper class (with an aristocratic elite at its core) co-existed with the huge mass of the labouring poor, who were predominantly *mestizo* and predominantly rural. The ethnic and social divisions coincided. Politically, the struggles which followed independence reflected disagreements within the fold of the upper class rather than deeper conflicts in the body social more generally. The rural poor remained passive throughout the period and, in fact, well beyond it. This relatively simple social structure was not complicated by sharp cleavages of economic interest within the upper class or by anything very much in the way of serious regional tension. Santiago and its rich hinterland dominated the republic. The remoter northern or southern provinces, whether disaffected or not, were powerless to alter the balance in their own favour, as was shown very clearly in the civil wars of 1851 and 1859. Concepción and the south underwent a frustratingly slow recovery from the wars of independence; and although Concepción, by virtue of its role as a garrison town watching over the frontier, was able in the uncertain atmosphere of the 1820s to impose its will on the capital – as it did in 1823, with the overthrow of Bernardo O'Higgins, and again in 1829 – in normal times a determined central government in control of the army (or most of it) could not easily be dislodged.

The issues which divided the upper class Chilean politicians of the 1820s into the perhaps predictable camps of Liberal and Conservative were above all ideological and personal. The dominant figure of these years, General Ramón Freire, was a well-intentioned Liberal eager to avoid the authoritarian pattern set by his immediate predecessor, the

liberator O'Higgins. The new republic drifted from one makeshift political experiment to the next. The complex and ingenious constitution devised by Juan Egaña at the end of 1823 broke down within six months, its moralistic conservatism rejected by the Liberals who surrounded Freire and who wished, as they put it, 'to build the Republic on the ruins of the Colony'. The vogue for federalist ideas which overwhelmed political circles soon afterwards owed less, perhaps, to regional aspirations than to the dogmatically radical convictions of the man of the moment, José Miguel Infante; it produced a draft constitution, numerous new laws, an atmosphere of growing uncertainty, mild disorders in several towns, and a propensity to mutiny on the part of the army. The 'anarchy' of the period has often been exaggerated by Chilean historians; it was very limited in comparison with the turmoil then occurring on the other side of the Andes. Another Liberal soldier, General Francisco Antonio Pinto, president from 1827 to 1829, briefly succeeded in organizing a government which showed signs of solidity, and a new constitution (1828), the fourth since independence, duly went into effect. It proved inadequate to stem the mounting reaction against Liberal reformism, coloured as this was by anti-aristocratic verbiage and a degree of anticlericalism. In September 1829, with the vital backing of the army in Concepción, a powerful tripartite coalition of Conservatives – the traditionalist and pro-clerical *pelucones* ('big wigs'), the followers of the exiled O'Higgins, and a tough-minded group known as the *estanqueros*[1] – launched a revolt against the Liberal regime. Freire, who sprang quixotically to its defence, was defeated in April 1830 at Lircay, the battle which ended the short civil war and ushered in more than a quarter of a century of Conservative rule.

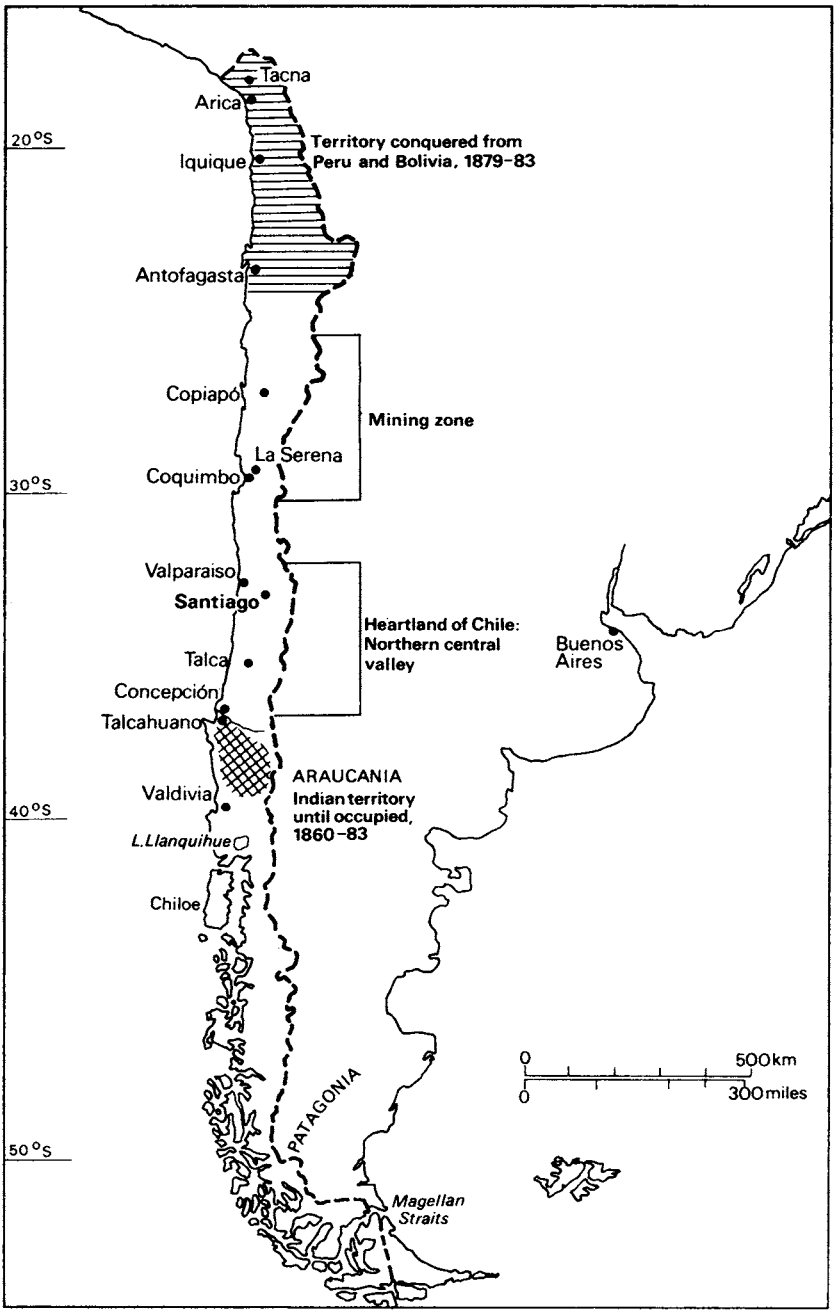
The political settlement of the 1830s was, as has been suggested, one of the more remarkable creations of nineteenth-century Latin America. The credit for its success is usually assigned to Diego Portales, the Valparaiso trader who more than anyone was the organizing genius of the Conservative reaction. Certainly Portales's ruthless tenacity was a key factor in keeping the new regime together, though his tenure of office as chief minister was fairly brief. This in itself may have impeded the crystalliza-

[1] In 1824 the *estanco*, or state tobacco monopoly, was leased to the Valparaiso trading house of Portales, Cea and Co., which undertook to service the £1,000,000 loan raised in London by the O'Higgins government two years earlier. The enterprise failed, and in 1826 the contract was withdrawn, occasioning much ill-feeling. The *estanquero* group was composed of men associated with this ill-starred venture; their leader was Diego Portales.

tion of a caudillo tradition in Chilean politics, for while Portales's influence was all-important, his aversion to the trappings of power was genuine enough. 'If I took up a stick and gave tranquillity to the country', he wrote, 'it was only to get the bastards and whores of Santiago to leave me in peace.'[2] Nevertheless, his actions both in government and behind the scenes, his strict emphasis on orderly management, his, at times, harsh attitude towards the defeated Liberals and, not least, his insistence on national dignity – these fixed the tone of official policy for years to come.

The work of the Conservatives in the 1830s was later described by critics of the regime as in essence a 'colonial reaction'. That it was a reaction to the ill-starred Liberal reformism of the 1820s is clear enough. But it is perhaps more accurate to see the new political system as a pragmatic fusion of the tradition of colonial authoritarianism, still very strong in Chile, with the outward forms (and something of the spirit) of nineteenth-century constitutionalism. The Constitution of 1833, whose regular operations were not interrupted until 1891 and which survived in amended form until 1925, embodied many of the principal Conservative obsessions. It was discernibly more authoritarian than its ill-fated predecessor of 1828, and in particular very strongly presidentialist. Two consecutive five-year terms of office were permitted, a provision which led in practice to four successive 'decennial' administrations, the first being that of Portales's nominee General Joaquín Prieto (1831–41). The president's patronage, control of the judiciary and public administration, and powers over Congress were all extensive, though the legislature was left with an ultimate check on the executive through its technical right to deny assent to the budget, taxation and military establishment. The president's emergency powers, in the form of 'extraordinary faculties' or localized states of siege, were highly conspicuous: moreover, such powers were regularly used – in one variety or another they were in force for one-third of the entire period between 1833 and 1861. The centralist spirit of the constitution was equally notable. The feeble institutional relics of the federalism of the 1820s were now swept away completely. The Intendant of each province was now defined as the president's 'natural and immediate agent' – and so it was to prove in practice: the Intendants were in some way the key officials of the regime, each Intendancy becoming in a real sense the local nexus of government. The

[2] Ernesto de la Cruz and Guillermo Feliú Cruz (eds.), *Epistolario de don Diego Portales*, 3 vols. (Santiago, 1937), I, 352.



Chile in the nineteenth century

hegemony of Santiago, already well entrenched, was thus reinforced at the expense of regional initiative.

No constitution, least of all in Spanish America, is efficacious on its own. The successful operation of the new political system depended on a number of well-tested techniques used with methodical persistence by the governments of the period. Some were more obvious than others. Repression was a recurrent tactic for three decades. By the standards of the twentieth century it did not amount to very much. The death sentence was far more often invoked than applied. The standard penalties for political dissent were incarceration, internal exile ('relegation'), or banishment abroad for a fixed period. Voluntary exile (sometimes under bond) was not uncommon, especially in the embattled decade of the 1850s. A less overt means of inculcating social discipline can be detected in the careful way in which the Conservatives restored clerical influence; until the 1850s the Church was a useful mainstay of the system. Likewise, the incipient militarism of the 1820s was curbed by a drastic purge of Liberal officers and by a comprehensive reorganization of the country's militias. By the middle of 1831 the National Guard numbered 25,000 men. It more than doubled in size later on and was a very credible counterweight to the regular army, whose peacetime establishment rarely went much above 3,000. Twice, in the mutinies of June 1837 and April 1851, the militias helped to save the regime from forcible overthrow. They also fitted very neatly into the government's control of the electoral process.

Electoral intervention runs like a constant theme through the entire period. It survived long after the repressive practices already mentioned. In fact it was a Liberal president who, when asked in 1871 by one of his ministers whether Chile would ever enjoy 'real' elections, curtly replied, 'Never!'[3] The electoral law of 1833 severely restricted the franchise, but spread the net just wide enough to include artisans and shopkeepers, many of whom formed the rank and file of the National Guard, which thus supplied a numerous voting contingent at every election. Quite apart from this invaluable support, the government resorted to any number of methods – intimidation, temporary arrest, personation, bribery – to prevent opposition voters from exercising their franchise and to secure comfortable majorities for its own candidates. The operation was co-ordinated by the Minister of the Interior, and his subaltern agents in the provinces, the Intendants, the departmental

[3] Abdón Cifuentes, *Memorias*, 2 vols. (Santiago, 1936), II, 69.

gobernadores and the *subdelegados*, were as adept as any modern Chicago ward boss (and possibly more so) in 'delivering' the vote. It is hardly surprising that seven out of the eleven congressional elections held between 1833 and 1864 (at regular three-year intervals) were either uncontested or virtually so. Even in the more tolerant political climate of the 1860s and 1870s, an opposition stood no chance whatever of electing a majority to Congress. Not until the 1890s did the executive cease to interfere directly in elections.

In its earliest years the new Conservative system both faced and survived the ultimate test of war. The relations between Chile and Peru deteriorated sharply in the early 1830s. Commercial rivalry, a brisk tariff war, and Peru's failure to repay a Chilean loan (itself part of the £1,000,000 loan raised by O'Higgins in London in 1822, on which Chile had long since defaulted) were not in themselves a sufficient cause for aggression. This was provided in 1836, when General Andrés Santa Cruz forcibly united Peru and Bolivia into a Confederation. Portales viewed the formation of this potentially powerful state as a threat to Chilean independence; it would not be an exaggeration to say that he pushed his country into war. He was himself one of its first victims. Discontent over the war brought renewed Liberal conspiracies, and the all-powerful minister was murdered by a mutinous army battalion in June 1837, an occurrence which seems to have greatly solidified support both for the war policy and for the regime in general. Portales's death delayed but did not deflect the course of events. The second of two Chilean expeditionary forces, under the command of General Manuel Bulnes, invaded Peru and defeated Santa Cruz's army at the battle of Yungay (January 1839). The Confederation dissolved. The war of 1836–9 was an example of national assertiveness which incurred strong disapproval from Great Britain and France, but it inevitably heightened the international prestige of Chile. At home, it enabled the Prieto government to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards the opposition, while the victorious General Bulnes became the obvious successor to the presidency. Just before the election Bulnes was betrothed to a daughter of the former Liberal president, Francisco Antonio Pinto, thus confirming the apparent trend towards political relaxation.

General Bulnes's presidency (1841–51) has often been represented as an 'era of good feelings' and for much of the time this was true. In the early 1840s, indeed, Liberalism came close to being killed by kindness. But Bulnes, for all his generous bonhomie, did nothing to undermine the

authoritarian framework; in certain respects (the stiff Press Law of 1846, for instance) he added to it. The revival of Liberalism as a political force towards the end of his second term owed much to the ambitions of his chief minister, Manuel Camilo Vial, whose following, well represented in Congress, went into active parliamentary opposition when Vial was dismissed (1849). The leading Liberal intellectual of the period, José Victorino Lastarria, attempted to give direction and coherence to this new opposition. Outside the congressional arena the young idealists Francisco Bilbao and Santiago Arcos, mesmerized by the French revolution of 1848, were active in trying to mobilize support among the artisans of the capital: their Sociedad de la Igualdad, with its meetings and marches, survived for much of the year 1850, until the inevitable imposition of emergency powers by the government. The main effect of this agitation, both Liberal and *igualitario*, was to frighten the Conservative party into accepting Manuel Montt as Bulnes's successor.

President Montt (1851–61) was the first civilian to govern Chile for more than a few weeks. His oddly opaque character has defied all attempts at precise historical portraiture. His talent was undeniable; so was his austere inflexibility. ('All head and no heart' was his bluff predecessor's private opinion.) Montt's election provoked three months of full-scale civil war, in which the challenge to the regime came not only from the Liberals but also, more seriously, from the southern provinces. The leader of the revolt, General José María de la Cruz, was in fact a Conservative and the cousin of ex-president Bulnes, who defeated him in a short but bloody campaign. For the moment the regime was safe. By the mid-1850s, however, Montt's authoritarian approach was inducing strains and tensions within the Conservative governing combination itself. These finally came into the open as the result of a noisy jurisdictional conflict between the government and the Church, which was now re-emerging as an independent factor in politics. In 1857 the bulk of the Conservative party defected and joined forces with what was left of the Liberal opposition. Those Conservatives who remained loyal to Montt founded a new National party, but it lacked the wider upper class support enjoyed by the nascent Liberal-Conservative Fusion. For a second time vigorous agitation led to renewed repression and so to a further armed challenge to the regime. The civil war of 1859 is chiefly remembered for the miracles of improvisation performed by the rebel army in the mining provinces of the north – the focus of the war – but once again the government won. This time, however, military victory was followed by

political defeat. Montt found it impossible to impose his own choice for the succession. This would have been Antonio Varas, Montt's closest associate and a highly talented politician. An elderly, easygoing, benevolent patrician, José Joaquín Pérez, was selected in Varas's place. It was a decisive turning point.

Under President Pérez (1861–71), the last of the four 'decennial' presidents, the Chilean political system at last began to liberalize. Pérez himself, by virtue of what was called at the time 'a supreme tolerance born of an even more supreme indifference', did as much as anybody in nineteenth-century Chile to enhance the tradition of stable constitutionalism. Repression ended, even if electoral intervention did not – Pérez's ministers saw to that. The new president, though himself nominally a National, quickly summoned the Liberal-Conservative Fusion into office (1862). This alliance between former enemies proved a remarkably workable governing combination, though it naturally attracted the opposition not only of the displaced Nationals (whose loyalty to Montt and Varas won them the name of *monttvaristas*) but also of the strongly anti-clerical 'red' or 'radical' Liberals who presently became known as the Radical party. The 1860s thus saw an increasingly diversified ideological panorama, and (except electorally) the 'new politics' was allowed to grow and thrive, although as it happened, domestic rivalries were somewhat dampened down in 1865–6, when the aggressive actions of a Spanish naval squadron cruising in Pacific waters drove Chile and three of her sister republics into a short war with their former metropolis.[4] By the close of the 1860s Liberal notions of constitutional reform were occupying the forefront of the political stage. Such ideas, centred, above all, on limiting presidential power, increasingly formed common ground between the four main parties. The first amendment to the hitherto inviolate Constitution of 1833 was passed in 1871; significantly, it prohibited the immediate re-election of the president.

It was during the government of Federico Errázuriz Zañartu (1871–6) that the final transition to Liberal-dominated politics occurred. In the early 1870s 'theological questions' (as they were called) began to be taken up as political issues. They were less concerned with theology, in fact, than with the demarcation of ecclesiastical and secular functions in the national life; they generated a good deal of feeling, both pious and

[4] Such fighting as there was (and there was not much) took place at sea. Before withdrawing from the Pacific, however, the Spaniards subjected Valparaíso to devastating bombardment (March 1866).

impious. A dispute about private education in 1873, pitting anticlericals against the Conservatives, who were becoming more and more identifiable as the militantly Catholic party in politics, brought about the disintegration of the Fusion. The Conservatives went into opposition, and the way was thus laid open for a new dominant coalition with a Liberal focus. The clever Errázuriz conducted the necessary manoeuvres. The Liberal Alliance (1875) was the third of the great governing combinations of the period, but the least stable, since several factions of the powerful Liberal party were invariably to be found opposing as well as supporting the government. The Errázuriz presidency also saw further constitutional reforms, all tending to limit executive influence. Important changes in electoral procedure (1874) were designed to reduce official intervention, but in 1876 Errázuriz and the Alliance had no difficulty in imposing the next president in the usual manner. Their choice fell on Aníbal Pinto, the son of the Liberal president of the later 1820s.

If the outline of the Conservative settlement of the 1830s was still very much intact, its inner workings were nonetheless altering in significant ways. Party politics had developed apace since the Pérez decade; the parties themselves were acquiring rudimentary forms of organization. The Radicals, with their network of local *asambleas*, were perhaps the first group to devise a definite (if flexible) structure. The Conservatives were the first to hold a national party conference (1878). But voting on party lines in Congress was far from automatic. When in 1876 the Radical deputy Ramón Allende (grandfather of the future president) suggested that party considerations should outweigh private principle in congressional voting, the idea was greeted with several outraged reactions. Quite apart from this, it was becoming clear by the later 1870s that Congress as a whole aspired to a much greater degree of control over the executive than had been attempted or perhaps even contemplated previously. The constitution, as we have seen, was strongly presidentialist; but it was also possible, as politicians now proved, to give it a logical 'parliamentary' interpretation. Through constant use of the *interpelación* and vote of censure, congressmen made the lives of cabinet ministers increasingly tedious and arduous. This was particularly the case during Aníbal Pinto's presidency (1876–81), which coincided, as we shall see, with several parallel crises of a very acute kind. That Chilean institutions had survived the tempests of the 1850s, that they were growing noticeably more tolerant – these things were cause for pride, certainly, but there