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Chilean Coup of September 1973;
Post-Mortem Report of Production in the Intelligence Community

BACKGROUND

On 11 September 1973 the Chilean Armed Forces mounted a successful coup against the Marxist government of President Salvador Allende. U.S. intelligence collectors did an excellent job of obtaining information concerning the immediate events which led up to the coup and concerning the development of the coup itself. This critique briefly examines the performance of the producers of intelligence during this period.

HIGHLIGHTS

Intelligence produced immediately prior to and during the coup was good. The NIE published the previous June did not provide advance warning of the coup, but current intelligence publications in CIA and DIA and special reports issued by these two agencies and by State/INR informed the consumer that the chances of a coup were increasing. The consumer was not, however, provided with coordinated national intelligence during the crucial period just prior to or during the coup. Some recommendations for product improvement appear on the last page of this report.

DISCUSSION

The National Intelligence Estimate

1. The National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 94-73, Chile, dated 14 June 1973, failed to foresee the seriousness of the developing crisis and gave a successful military coup only an "outside chance". It concluded that the most likely eventuality was a political standoff. The next most likely courses--given roughly equal weight--were said to be a "repudiation" of the regime, or, conversely, a consolidation and strengthening of the regime. (The term "repudiation" as used in the NIE indicated circumstances in which Allende had retained his office but had lost some of his power, as a consequence of the military's ability to limit his political freedom of action.)
2. The three principal possibilities examined in the NIE (standoff, repudiation, or consolidation) reflected the three positions supported by one or another element in the Intelligence Community in June. A standoff (or "muddling through") had been the dominant estimate in past NIEs, but uneasiness over this position mounted during the spring. The Office of National Estimates felt that the chances of institutional collapse in Chile had grown substantially, although it was timid in clearly stating

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this conviction. DIA considered consolidation of the Allende regime the most likely course, and DIA representatives initially pressed for this position (but subsequently agreed that a political standoff was more likely). State/INR representatives held more closely to the views of earlier papers, i.e., that Allende and his regime would somehow survive. There were individual analysts in other agencies who shared this view.

3. The initial draft of the NIE (by ONE) did not rank the three possibilities in terms of probability. Under pressure from some of the representatives, however, a ranking of alternatives was added. Still, neither the proponents of repudiation nor those of consolidation felt firm enough in their views to press them vigorously against the conventional wisdom that Allende would be able somehow to muddle through. And, in truth, Allende's oft-demonstrated ability to weather crises during the first three years of his administration lent considerable credibility to this conclusion.

4. Readers of the NIE could not readily see the divergence of views that lay behind the finished Estimate. On the contrary, the NIE made it appear that the Intelligence Community as a body saw approximately the same possibilities in the same order of likelihood. The consumer would surely have been better served if the preparing element (ONE) had stated its position with less diffidence, and if others with different views had set these forth clearly and without unnecessary equivocation. At the very least, this would have permitted consumers to ponder both the evidence and the arguments of the experts, all within the context of a complex and uncertain situation.

5. The NIE became stale over the summer. Events in August--the failure of the military to force any real changes in Allende's course and the ultimate resignation of the moderate General Prats--called for a reassessment.* It would not have been possible to predict a coup with any real certainty, but the institutional crisis had deepened, especially with Prats' departure, and the customer should have been warned that a military coup was something more than merely an "outside chance".

Current Intelligence

6. A revised Estimate would have helped to provide focus for current intelligence production in August and early September. Current intelligence analysts, like estimators, were reluctant to conclude that the Chilean military would ever actually move against Allende. To be sure, there was considerable justification for this wariness. It had appeared on several occasions that the armed forces were preparing to move, but Allende had demonstrated great skill in dealing with military threats, often at the last moment. And the military itself had demonstrated no real desire to take over the reins of government.

*Prats' resignation, and its impact on events, had not been anticipated in the NIE.

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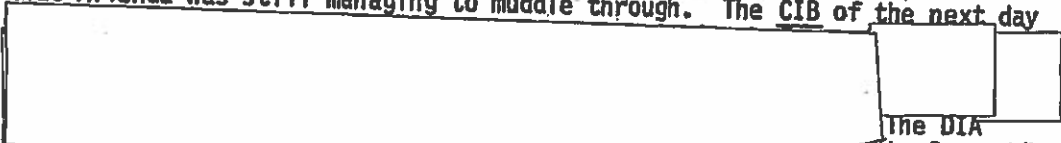

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7. Current intelligence publications during August emphasized the general worsening of economic and political conditions in Chile. The DIA INTSUM of 25 August noted that the resignation of General Prats "removed the main factor mitigating against a coup", and the CIA CIB of 28 August recognized that the resignation of General Prats marked "a major change in the situation in Chile".* The CIA Weekly Review of 31 August, however, was not consistent with the CIB. It failed to highlight the seriousness of the Prats resignation, the lead paragraph lightly stating, "Spring is in the air and contending forces are taking another look at whether they can put off a day of reckoning."

8. During the period from 15 August to 12 September, the Department of State's weekly, Current Foreign Relations, carried only one item on Chile. That item, from the regional bureau, not INR, concerned the resignation of Chilean Air Force CINC and Minister of Public Works, General Cesar Ruiz Danyau. No INR papers on Chile for external distribution were produced during the period from 1 August to mid-September.

9. The DIA Crisis Situation Alert Report of 1 September pointed out the increasing possibility of a confrontation between Allende and the armed forces and Allende's increasingly restricted political maneuverability. But it also said that conciliatory moves vis-a-vis the opposition were still a way out for Allende. The 1 September CIB noted a "temporary respite" for Allende, and several CIBs during the first week of September and the CIA Weekly Review of 7 September did not carry items on Chile. By 6 September, the DIA INTSUM noted that, "The officers are now looking more toward easing into power than attempting a classic takeover".

10. Despite growing violence accompanying massive pro- and anti-government demonstrations, the CIA CIB of 7 September left the impression that Allende was still managing to muddle through. The CIB of the next day


The DIA INTSUM of 8 September discussed pre-coup maneuvers in some detail, but was "out of reach". Although the 8 September INTSUM did not state that a coup was inevitable, it left a clear impression that a coup was close at hand. The CIA CIB of 10 September contained only a brief note on Chile which did not mention a possible coup. The DIA INTSUM of 10 September reported that naval officers plotting against the regime had postponed their move, that the other services had become more interested in a coup, but that Allende might still avert it.

*CIA had noted Prats' resignation in earlier CIBs, but detailed analysis did not appear until 28 August largely because of delays encountered in coordinating the in-depth item with DIA and State.

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11. By the morning of 11 September, [REDACTED] sources of the Defense Attache office were warning of the impending coup.* Starting on that morning, each intelligence agency produced those items it perceived as best meeting user needs. Daily publications were supplemented by Spot Reports; CIA produced five and DIA seven. State/INR produced about 20 Chilean Situation Reports during the crisis. (CIA and DIA Task Forces were dissolved on 12 September, but the INR Task Force continued to operate for a longer period.) In addition, each agency provided briefing support as required.

12. A survey indicates that consumers were generally well satisfied with the intelligence they had received during this period.

13. There was no coordinated national intelligence produced immediately prior to or during the crisis. The CIB piece of 7 September was the last coordinated item provided consumers. Many difficulties attend the coordination of the CIB, e.g., the pressure of deadlines, communications problems, and bureaucratic delays accompanying the preparation and approval of dissenting footnotes. DIA advised CIA that it had analysts available to coordinate intelligence, but CIA did not respond. State/INR indicated that they were not asked to coordinate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

a. It would be impractical and probably undesirable to try to force formal estimates to serve a current role, but--time permitting--NIEs should be updated when events occur which significantly alter basic judgments. It would probably have served both the community and its consumers well if a Memorandum to Holders of NIE 94-73 had been written on, say, 1 September; the obsolescence of earlier judgments could in this way have been exposed, and the then growing instability of the political scene in Santiago could have been forcefully delineated.

b. An expression of the probability of events in quantified terms would probably have been useful to the consumer. Either quantified expressions (e.g., the odds are 2 to 1, the chances are 1 in 10, or the chances are better than even) or clear language indicating probabilities would have provided greater precision than was the case in the muffled verbalizations of prospects that appeared in the CIA CIB or the DIA INTSUM on 8 September.

*One important message from the Defense Attache (DATT 616) reported a visit by two Chilean Air Force general officers to the US Air Attache. The information the Chileans provided about the coup reached DIA at 110323 EST, but the message did not reach the CIA addressees until some 24 hours later.

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c. There is no effective machinery for producing national intelligence in crisis situations. Proposals currently under consideration for National Watch Officers Bulletins, National Analysts Summaries or other national publications would help to give the customer an intelligence product which would provide for the expression of reasoned dissent or the identification of community-wide agreement.

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