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Did the Chilean Press Need CIA Help?

By EVERETT G. MARTIN

In his press conference this week President Ford was asked about recent disclosures that the Central Intelligence Agency was authorized to spend some \$9 million to "destabilize" the government of Chile's Marxist President Salvador Allende. The President admitted that the CIA gave support, presumably in the form of money, to opposition news media and political parties.

Specifically, the President said: "In a period of time, three or four years ago, there was an effort being made by the Allende government to destroy opposition news media, both the writing press as well as the electronic press. And to destroy opposition political parties."

"And the effort that was made in this case was to help and assist the preservation of opposition newspapers and electronic media and to preserve opposition political parties."

He concluded: "I think this is in the best interest of the people of Chile and certainly in our best interest."

This interference in the internal affairs of another nation is a staggering admission for the President to make, and his conclusion is, at the very best, questionable.

There isn't any doubt, however, that the opposition news media had been pushed to the wall by the Marxists. The President's statement gives part of the explanation of how it managed to survive at all.

Except for a very few cases, Chile's news media have always been wildly partisan in political matters. News stories generally were polemics and thoroughly unreliable as sources of balanced, accurate information. To read the government and opposition press on any given day was like reading about events in two different countries. The result was that most readers bought the paper that said what they wanted to hear; there was none of the cross-fertilization of ideas that might take the heat out of an issue.

Where opposition newspapers and magazines were concerned, the Allende forces did very little overtly to curtail their right to print what they wanted. But the evidence indicates a clear attempt to strangle them economically by cutting off their revenue.

The Chilean government and state-owned industries were the largest single group of advertisers. It wasn't surprising in such a polarized situation that they stopped advertising in opposition media. As the Marxists through one means or another took control of the banks and private industry, government hold over advertising became overwhelming. The worsening economic situation and scarcities exacerbated the situation until publications appeared with virtually no visible means of support.

Then there was the Marxist attempt to take over the paper company, known familiarly as the Papelera, that supplied 65% of the newsprint. Failing in an effort to buy the firm's shares and to agitate the 51,000 workers to seize the plant, the government tried to force

which means automatic government control. Denied anything but insignificant price increases at a time when costs were tripling, Papelera was soon losing thousands of dollars a day. Only when chaos threatened as crowds took to the streets supporting the company did the government back off in a moment of political compromise.

Newspapers in smaller towns came under more direct attack than the big dailies of Santiago. An editor's life was threatened in Rancagua by mobs of leftists, and workers seized control of papers in other cities. In Talca after workers seized the paper, the supreme court ruled it was illegal; but the government refused to obey the court order to end the occupation. "It's not socially possible to obey the court," a Socialist Party member reasoned at the time.

But newspapers actually reach relatively few people in Chile. Much more important as a mass media is the radio, and closures of radio stations by the Allende government got to be a common occurrence.

Once a Santiago station was closed because it reported that two miners were shot to death during a copper strike. The report was slightly wrong. Only one miner died; the other was critically wounded. For this, the government declared the station had endangered national security. The supreme court again ordered the station reopened, but the government minister involved refused. The court then ordered his arrest, and the Marxists countered with a threat to start impeachment proceedings against the entire court for upholding bourgeois laws against the will of the people.

Government television and radio stations, on the other hand, once caused rioting in the streets with a false report that rightwing forces were about to attack the army. This abuse went unpunished.

Television was another area where the government's actions were overt.

The University of Chile had a station in Santiago that was staffed entirely with extreme leftists broadcasting pure Marxist propaganda. The student body voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to expell the leftists and change to a neutral format; but when the school's administration,

which was bound by law to obey the referendum, tried to take control, the leftists rejected them by force.

The police wouldn't act, and President Allende ordered university officials to continue the Marxists on the payroll. Then the school tried to set up a second station, but the police raided it and smashed the equipment.

The Catholic University ran into similar repression when it tried to set up a second channel to serve the southern city of Concepcion with a format that attempted to be non-partisan.

At first the government claimed that the station's signal would interfere with radio reception at the Concepcion airport, which was patently not the case. The university defiantly went ahead with its plans; so the government set up jamming equipment to interrupt its programs. In the ensuing controversy, the priest who ran the university's television network was even held in jail for a short period.

It was genuinely a question how long some elements of Chile's opposition media could hold out as the pressure against it mounted near the end of the Allende administration. It might be easy to rationalize why the CIA thought it should step in with support money. It is something that no doubt we shall eventually learn we are doing in other countries. But does that justify such intervention in Chile's internal affairs?

And was it even necessary?

The opposition forces demonstrated time and again through various by-elections and the 1973 congressional elections that they were the majority. It seems a kind of arrogance for Washington planners to think that the Chilean majority would let its protesting voice disappear entirely from print and from the airwaves even if established publications and stations collapsed by the dozens.

One might also ask where is the CIA's concern for an opposition press in Chile now that the military junta which deposed the Allende government has effectively silenced all opposition?

Fortunately, no disclosures so far indicate that the U.S. government was involved in the actual coup against the Allende government, but the records should be laid bare to make sure.

In the Chilean case, President Allende's own actions in subverting the democracy, in smuggling arms from Cuba to set up a clandestine army and in wrecking the country's economy were more than adequate to "destabilize" his government.

But what if it had turned out differently? What if he hadn't done those self-destructive things and finally through progressive programs had earned the allegiance of a majority of Chileans? How then could President Ford claim that the CIA's actions were "in the best interests of the people of Chile"?

Mr. Martin, a member of the Journal's New York bureau, covers Latin American the coup.

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