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SUBJECT Interview with Seymour Hersh

TOM BROKAW: There are new charges out this morning that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were responsible for the death of President Salvador Allende of Chile. Judy Woodruff is in our Washington studio with the reporter who broke that story.

JUDY WOODRUFF: We are with Seymour Hersh, who is working on a book right now on Henry Kissinger.

You have an article coming out in The Atlantic magazine this month. It's being released today. And what exactly are you accusing Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon of doing?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, let me make clear I'm not accusing them of the death of Allende in '73. We don't know what happened in '73, if he was overthrown and killed or committed assassination [sic] during the overthrow. What I'm saying is we've been looking at the wrong issue. The real story isn't what happened in '73. It seems to me one of the stories we could look at is what happened in 1970 when Allende was elected.

WOODRUFF: And what are you saying their precise involvement was?

HERSH: I'm saying that I started out writing a book about Kissinger, Nixon, and their foreign policy, and I decided to take a good hard look at how policy is made, what really happens. And I've discovered that in Chile in 1970 the CIA thought, Richard Helms and others...

WOODRUFF: Excuse me. Now we're seeing pictures of Allende's inauguration, and this was in November of 1970.

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HERSH: November, early November. He'd been elected September -- in early September by the Chilean people by a few percentage points, a very small plurality. And the White House was very upset about this. They thought he would not win. He was a Marxist, so they thought, socialist. And about 11 days after his election there was a meeting in the White House. None of us will ever know what happened at that meeting: Nixon, Kissinger, Helms, John Mitchell, the Attorney General.

What I do know is that Dick Helms, Richard Helms, the head of the CIA, afterwards thought that he had been authorized to assassinate Allende if necessary.

WOODRUFF: Now, how do you know that? Helms, himself, has denied that the President directly ordered him to go after Allende.

HERSH: He was asked at the Senate Intelligence Committee, which investigated this incident in 1975, he was asked whether or not assassination was talked about. And he said -- it's a very interesting answer. He said, "Well, sir, not in my mind."

And anyway, I'll give him some credit for being a lot more interesting than I thought. But the fact is Helms did tell associates later -- and I can't -- this is one of the problems. As you know, I've been a journalist a long time in Washington and written many stories. I don't write things like this lightly. He did say that he'd been under terrific pressure from the White House to get something more -- get something done against Allende personally.

And I think this information has been provided to his lawyer. I know his lawyer at one point was talk -- Edward Bennett Williams was talking about Helms having memcons -- that is, conversations, notes on conversations -- in which Kissinger was pushing him very hard on this issue.

And let me take it another step further. What I've done is also found that the people in the field for the CIA -- and that's the thing I can talk about with the most certitude -- they thought they were under pressure. And in fact, one person for the CIA was recruited especially for a job, a sensitive job, given a false passport, sent into Chile, and passed money to somebody whose sole mission in life at that point was to kill Allende.

WOODRUFF: Now, some of that came out in the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings in 1975.

HERSH: Well, not the assas -- yes, certainly. Oh, my

God, the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings were absolutely first rate and they got very far into it. But there were a lot of things they didn't get into. One of the things is they didn't get into this issue of what was really authorized.

WOODRUFF: But isn't it one thing to say that the people in the field thought they were under pressure to do these things and then to directly tie it to the President?

HERSH: That's the Becket question, I guess. You know, it's almost impossible to recreate a meeting in the White House. There was no White House taping system at that time. And the best one can do is report what one finds. And what one finds is that an awful lot of responsible people thought they were working for Nixon and Kissinger, that the head of the CIA was talking about pressure, that basically -- in fact, I will tell you there was an internal investigation, about which I write at great length in my magazine article, in which a CIA officer investigating this at the time, about a few months later, concluded that the Chilean general who'd been allegedly kidnapped and then killed during the kidnapping had in fact been executed by the CIA.

WOODRUFF: What laws were broken?

HERSH: Oh, who knows? I mean I don't know. Laws against mankind, I guess. I mean technical laws? Oh, I'm sure the law in Chile was broken by our government. Conspiracy to murder, I think. In fact, you ask a good -- you know, instead of wondering about sources, I wish somebody would say, "Maybe we should get a grand jury going and look into these things."

WOODRUFF: Is this sort of thing still going on?

HERSH: In Central America today? Is the President authorizing assassinations? No, I doubt that. But are people being murdered? Yes.

WOODRUFF: All right. On that note, thank you, Seymour Hersh.