

27

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Bringing On Pinochet

THE LAST TWO YEARS OF SALVADOR ALLENDE

By Nathaniel Davis.

480 pp. Ithaca, N. Y.:

Cornell University Press. \$24.95.

By Tad Szulc

In his poignant and illuminating tale of the events surrounding the military coup in Chile and the death of the elected Marxist President, Nathaniel Davis describes the entire Chilean drama as a "morality play" in which "the United States assumed a central role."

A career Foreign Service officer with a firm sense of morality, Mr. Davis was United States Ambassador in Santiago from October 1971 to November 1973. He draws from this experience judgments that are as penetrating as they are profoundly disturbing about the continuing American policies toward small countries that incur Washington's ideological displeasure.

The great importance and timeliness of Mr. Davis's "The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende" (the same years Mr. Davis was in Chile) lies not in any major revelations — there are very few — but in what it tells philosophically and politically about the tendency of United States administrations of both major parties to intervene in the affairs of Latin American nations. For that matter, American interventions are not confined to this hemisphere, and two years after his assignment to Chile Mr. Davis resigned as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs because he opposed the Ford Administration's plans for American covert operations in Angola (his prestige, however, was enough to assure him immediately afterward the ambassadorship to Switzerland before his retirement). His book therefore is very relevant to the Reagan Administration's overt and covert operations designed to oust the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua — and to the changing justifications given for these endeavors. As in the case of Chile, the United States Government does not acknowledge that its efforts are intended to overthrow the Government in Nicaragua, and Mr. Davis provides a superb study of the theory and practice of covert interventions.

To be sure, open United States interventions in Latin America after World War II did occur in Cuba (the Bay of Pigs in 1961), the Dominican Republic (1965), and Grenada (1983), but the interventionist enterprise in Chile was carried out indirectly and with relative sophistication.

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All these interventions were designed to stem the possible rise of Communism in this hemisphere — and in the eyes of Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger, the democratic election of Salvador Allende to the Chilean presidency in 1970 represented a Communist threat. Mr.

Davis emphasizes that a National Security Decision Memorandum, issued by Mr. Kissinger on the President's behalf a month after Allende took office, "established a policy of applying unacknowledged pressure on Allende's government to prevent its consolidation and to limit its ability to implement policies contrary to U.S. interests and those of our friends." In total secrecy, Mr. Nixon had also authorized a plan (the so-called Track II) for a coup d'état to prevent Allende's inauguration as President, and it remains unclear whether these instructions were ever canceled. In any event, Mr. Davis writes that he learned of Track II only in 1975, when a Senate committee investigated the Chilean operations of the Central Intelligence Agency.

What appears to matter to Mr. Davis the most — and I imagine it should matter to all Americans — is the moral aspect of United States policies. He refutes very credibly the charges that the American Government had, actually "masterminded" the 1973 coup, yet he instantly notes the existence of a debate over "U.S. moral complicity in Allende's murder." He writes that the impact of the coup and Allende's suicide (Mr. Davis explains in enormous detail why he believes it was a suicide though in other instances he uses the word "murder" for the Allende death) was "searing," certainly to him; it is here that the former Ambassador assigns the "central role" to the United States in the Chilean "morality play."

Mr. Davis chooses not to answer his own question about the American "moral complicity," but the clear conclusion emerging from his book is that, if nothing else, the Nixon Administration had led the Chilean military to assume that a coup against Allende was desirable and therefore the United States inevitably shares the blame (or the credit) for it. His narrative shows how Washington had applied intense economic pressures to bring Allende down, and there seems to be no doubt that the United States had helped create a political climate conducive to a coup even though — as Mr. Davis repeatedly points out — Allende was guilty of colossal economic, political and ideological mismanagement. In fact, Mr. Davis presents a great deal of evidence that Allende would have been overthrown sooner or later because of his own policies, his vacillations, and the disarray he had allowed to develop inside his Government.

STILL, the crucial point remains that American hands in Chile were not clean — Mr. Davis reports that the C.I.A. spent at least \$6 million on covert operations during Allende's three years in power — and that the United States helped kill an experiment in alternatives to rightist or leftist totalitarianisms in the third world. Allende's concept was the "Chilean Way" to socialism — through elections and not revolution. This was the first time in history that a Marxist regime was elected, and Mr. Davis deplores Allende's toleration of the often foolish behavior of his leftist allies, which ultimately led to his defeat and death.

"All this matters," Mr. Davis writes, "because

CON2

2

it is important that hopes of social transformation through democracy and law be kept alive if possible, across the spectrum of the left. The Chilean Way was the highest expression we have yet seen of central-core Marxists trying to follow the peaceful road to socialism."

Fifteen years after Allende was thus elected to travel this road, the Chilean experience is obviously crucial as the United States seeks rational solutions in Central America and beyond. Mr. Davis advocates realism in dealing with the world around us when he comments that "Socialism may not be the best or even a good way to order a society's affairs, but the ability of free citizens to choose socialism, or capitalism, or some other economic system, is beyond price." □

Tad Szulc, author of "The Illusion of Peace" and other books on foreign affairs, is working on a biography of Fidel Castro.