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**Doing Foreign Policy the American way:  
U.S. Covert Regime Change Interventions in the Cold War.  
The Cases of Allende's Chile and  
of Afghanistan after the Soviet Invasion**

Maria Elena Cavallaro

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SUPERVISOR

Gregory Alegi

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CO-SUPERVISOR

Riccardo Serra

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CANDIDATE

ID No. 646802

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To my parents, who have supported me  
throughout my education

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## INTRODUCTION

On 11 September 1973, the Chilean armed forces initiated a nationwide coup to overthrow socialist President Salvador Allende, who died of an apparent suicide that same day. On 15 February 1989, the last contingent of Soviet soldiers left Afghanistan almost a decade after the Soviet Union deployed thousands of troops in the Central Asian country. These two seemingly unrelated events, which occurred on opposite sides of the world, sharing few, if any, similarities, have something in common: secret United States government's interference. Since President Harry Truman signed into law the National Security Act of 1947, which established the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), American leaders assumed that acting covertly abroad could constitute a cheaper and quicker alternative to direct intervention, as a way to protect and promote U.S. interests, while always remaining in a position of plausible deniability. To most American Cold-War policymakers, direct intervention seemed too costly and lengthy, especially after the debacle of the Vietnam War. However, from the highly negative public reactions to the publicisation of covert operations, such as the 1985-7 Iran-Contra affair, no other form of intelligence operation can be considered as controversial as this one.

Out of the tens of major covert operations run by the CIA during the Cold War, the choice to focus on Chile and Afghanistan resides in the extent to which the U.S. government agencies acted in these specific instances. Indeed, in both cases, the covert operation resulted in the fall of the previous government, namely the socialist government headed by Allende in Chile and the Soviet-backed Najibullah government in Afghanistan, and its replacement by a more authoritarian regime led respectively by Augusto Pinochet and the Taliban. These case studies represent two moments in U.S. foreign policy history that have shaped not only the future of the two countries impacted, but also affected the surrounding areas and their perception of U.S. power.

After cautioning the reader about the conclusions inferred by the author through the examination of declassified governmental records, the introduction lays the theoretical grounds for a deeper understanding of covert regime-change interventions as one of the most controversial tools available to those responsible for foreign policymaking. This section answers four basic questions regarding this phenomenon: What constitutes covert intervention? How many types of covert action has a policymaker at his disposal? What are the advantages of intervening covertly rather than overtly? What are the dangers of covert intervention?

The first chapter delves into the unique American approach to covert action by briefly tracing its history since the creation of the CIA up until the start of the Nixon Administration in January 1969. Although not strictly necessary to understand the extent to which the United States intervened in Chile and Afghanistan, it offers interesting insights into how each president, no matter the political affiliation, saw fit to resort to hidden intervention into the affairs of other nations to pursue American objectives. It shows how the United States was rarely concerned about interfering with the domestic affairs of either allies or adversaries, sometimes even acting pre-emptively fearing the USSR would eventually creep in and subvert their systems of government. The case studies have been selected both for their extensive nature and their consequential impact.

The second chapter is entirely focused on the CIA-induced fall of the Chilean President Salvador Allende Gossens, democratically elected in 1970 by a plurality of Chile's citizens. The reconstruction follows the chronological order of events, beginning with a discussion of how the government of the United States had been interested in Chile long before the election of 1970. A large part of covert actions – a concurrent two-path strategy designated 'Track I' and 'Track II' – happened between the day of the election, September 4<sup>th</sup>, and the day of the inauguration of Allende by the Chilean Congress, October 24<sup>th</sup>, thus the chapter focuses extensively on this period. Then, since the U.S. did not succeed through direct means in

avoiding an Allende presidency, it concentrated, the chapter explains, on increasing the probability that the Chileans would overthrow the Allende government themselves. For some scholars, an invisible economic blockade was implemented, which was able to heighten political and social unrest, thus leading to the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1973, coup. However, a different interpretation is offered, which underplays the effects of such blockade, at least in so far as arguing that those economic actions were not actively perpetuated by the United States government but were for the most part a result of the disastrous economic situation of the South American country. U.S. efforts also concentrated on infiltrating the media sector, in particular the newspapers, to influence public opinion and cause public outrage towards Allende's socialist reforms.

Finally, the third chapter is devoted to the other case study: Operation Cyclone. The covert aid program put in place by the CIA in order to fund the Afghan rebels, the mujahideen, against the Soviet invasion of their country started in December 1979. As chapter 2, the structure of chapter 3 unpacks American covert actions in Afghanistan following the chronological order of events up until the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989. It starts by briefly discussing the disinterested position of the United States towards the South Asian country until the end of the 1970s. Then, it clarifies that the Carter Administration's decision to aid the rebels started months before the Soviet invasion, thus invalidating the argument that the covert operation started as a result of the Soviet invasion. With the election of President Reagan, funding for the mission stepped up to hundreds of millions of dollars per year. The focus of the next section is on the two biggest actors, one domestic and one foreign, that promoted this covert operation: the U.S. Congress and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's largest intelligence service. It also gives reasons on why the executive needed external help to succeed in their covert efforts. An overview of the composition of the mujahideen, the recipients of the aid, precedes the ending section – the Soviet withdrawal – to

clarify that they were not a unified force, but often fought among each other in a constant struggle for power.

### *A note of caution on primary sources*

The historical analysis that follows has developed in large part from a careful dissection of a substantial number of declassified documents, publicly available either through the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) database or the National Security Archive of George Washington University. These primary sources were all made public through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which requires the partial or full disclosure of information controlled by government agencies under the executive branch. Even though these covert operations were conducted almost exclusively by the CIA, some documents come from the Department of State, the White House, the National Security Council and its subcommittees, as evidence that covert operations were undertaken by a number of actors, although the amount of people able to alter the direction of such operations was quite limited to protect their secrecy.

Now public, these documents cannot be said to reveal the complete truth behind these controversial secret operations. Most documents still have words, paragraphs or even full pages redacted after declassification. Therefore, at present, it is only possible to glue together pieces of evidence in order to summarily understand what might have happened in the United States at the decisional level. In the following years, the release of new documents might add key missing details to the unfolding of these operations or perhaps completely change the narrative described in this thesis and elsewhere. As a matter of fact, selective declassification, in particular when public information on a topic is scarce, which is the case for covert action, allows successive Presidents to control the narrative over controversial episodes of their



country's foreign policy (Dudding 2020). Therefore, the reader is cautioned that, although today this thesis is of an informative nature, in the future it might be regarded as misinforming.

Furthermore, the domain of covert action is elusive to precisely scrutinise. Even through primary sources, American administrations tended to avoid pointing out the exact extent of their efforts to influence the politics of other countries (Isenberg 1989). Having to do more with the Chilean case than with the secret financing of the mujahideen in Afghanistan, the interference of the United States was complex enough that still 50 years later scholars disagree on the true measures put into effect and the results that they achieved.

### ***Defining covert intervention***

Before jumping into the historical reconstruction of the Chile and Afghanistan operations, it would be useful explaining the logic behind covert intervention to better understand this tool of foreign policy, which secretly shaped the power dynamics that characterised the 50-year-long Cold War. During the Cold War, U.S. foreign policymakers, including the various presidents elected from both sides of the aisle, subscribed to an idea of competition with the Soviet Union that can be described as following: “the side that would not move forward would decline” (Cogan 1993, p. 80). In other words, the advance of one superpower in a region of the world needed to be neutralised by either strenuously opposing such an advance or advancing in a different area. Or according to a former chief of the CIA's Covert Action Staff (in Johnson 1989, p. 84): “the global challenge of communism [is] to be countered whenever and wherever it seemed to threaten our interests”.

Policymakers had at their disposal three options to serve their needs: diplomatic pressure, military intervention or covert action. This latter was seen as a “middle option” (Berkowitz and Goodman 1998, p. 38) between diplomatic pressure and military action from the assumption that it would be more impactful than diplomacy, but less confrontational than

open armed involvement. It seemed a more prudent alternative to doing nothing or doing too much. As Henry Kissinger (1978, in Johnson 1989, p. 82), President Nixon's National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, once said: "We need an intelligence community that, in certain complicated situations, can defend the American national interest in grey areas where military operations are not suitable and diplomacy cannot operate". Within the CIA, covert action has also been labelled as the "quiet option" (Johnson 1989, p. 82), based on the assumption that this option would be less obtrusive and noisy than the overt use of force. As it will be clarified in the next chapters, this proved to be false in several instances, including in the major operations that are the focus of this thesis.

In 1976, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which still oversees the activities of the U.S. Intelligence Community, defined covert operations as:

any clandestine activity designed to influence foreign governments, events, organisations, or persons in support of United States foreign policy [...] planned and executed so as to conceal the identity of the sponsor or else to permit the sponsor's plausible denial of the operation. (in Isenberg 1989)

Formal definitions also appeared in other documents, such as in Executive Order 12036, signed by President Carter in January 1978, which used the term 'special activities' to refer to covert operations, or in the 1980 Intelligence Accountability Act, which distinguished covert acts from espionage (O'Rourke 2020). While espionage is about collecting information to properly decide on a strategy, covert acts are the implementation of such strategy. In other words, covert action is about directly influencing the course of events in a foreign country without exposing the role of the United States.

It might seem safe to argue then that what differentiates covert action is its covertness. However, secrecy rotates around a central core: *plausible deniability*. As a matter of fact, it would not be enough for a covert operation to be conducted in secret, but also for the role of

the United States to be reasonably deniable to the public both before, during and after the execution of such a mission. Therefore, what distinguishes covert acts from overt ones is not the chosen type of operation, but their nature (Bowman 1998). Paramilitary operations, propaganda campaigns, assassination plots and coup attempts can be carried out both overtly and in secret. The capacity to plausibly deny the involvement of the U.S. becomes the sole distinguishing feature of covert action.

### ***The types of covert intervention***

Although the final aim of covert operations might be the overthrowing of an unfriendly government or the neutralisation of a Soviet-backed dictator, clandestine acts are not all brutal. The most common form of covert action is propaganda, distributed by a network of agents paid to infiltrate the mass media and, once successful, to disseminate books, magazines, newspapers, leaflets, broadcasts favourable to the accomplishment of U.S. interests. As the chapter on Chile will place into a more practical dimension, propaganda has been used to discredit foreign leaders or groups. An example of covert propaganda campaign has been the funding of Radio Free Europe (broadcasting to Soviet satellite countries) and Radio Liberty (broadcasting to the USSR) by the CIA between the early 1950s and early 1970s in order to contain Soviet control over Eastern Europe and erode the internal stability of the Soviet republics (Johnson 1989).

Propaganda inherently presents simultaneously an advantage and a disadvantage: once the information has been released, it cannot be sure that it will reach only one spot on the globe. It might have a replay effect where the false information directed against a certain enemy of America spreads back at home and deceives its citizens. From a more positive outlook, Johnson (1989) argued that this infinite multiplier effect had the advantage of bringing costs down, since after a piece of information was released, the American executive and intelligence agencies did not have to spread it in other contexts.

Another type of covert act is political and economic action, which involves the financing of individuals or groups that have either implicitly or explicitly shown support for a change in the status quo to favour U.S. interests. This included the provision of counsel or money to political leaders or the development of relationships with individuals that might have the potential to replace the leaders disliked by American presidents. Johnson (2001) reported that the USA has done so in a multitude of countries, such as Italy, Jordan, Egypt, Greece, West Germany, Cambodia, Iran, Ecuador and Lebanon. Additionally, it entailed attempting to damage the economy of countries to increase the level of social unrest, thus intensifying the likelihood that a new government, more favourable to their interests, would come to power (Callanan 2010). For instance, in their effort to bring down Fidel Castro's regime, in the 1960s the CIA acted to reduce the world price of sugar, one of the major exports of Cuba. Or under Reagan, the CIA carried out numerous bombing campaigns in Nicaragua to destroy harbours, power lines and fuel pipelines to hurt the Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN) hold onto power.

The last type of covert action is the most controversial and riskier: paramilitary operations. However, even if their risk of causing a Soviet-American confrontation was higher than when employing other types of covert action, it carried a lower risk than an overt aggressive campaign. Imagine the death of a U.S. Army brigadier general in a Soviet strike compared to the death in the same strike of a CIA operative, both focused on keeping stable the transport of weapons from Pakistan to the Afghan rebels. The U.S. government would be more pressured to avenge the killing of the brigadier since his mission and death would have to be disclosed to the public (Treverton 1987). During the Cold War, the United States sponsored guerrilla wars in Bolivia, Venezuela, Thailand, Guatemala, Hungary, Poland, Vietnam, Cuba, China and in many others (O'Rourke 2020). The CIA also funded training activities, sent military advisers and delivered weapons and ammunition (Westad 2005).

Therefore, understanding the complexity of covert operations lies in unpacking the different types of covert action and comprehending their effect.

### ***Covert intervention: advantages and drawbacks***

Analysing the benefits and limitations of covert action means recognising why or why not acting covertly is better than acting openly. First, covert action that reaches its planned objective and is not discovered by the public is more advantageous than overt operations since it is able to secure the advancement of the American position, while avoiding the costs of being watched and judged (Johnson 2001). Because covert actions decisions were taken secretly by a restricted group of policymakers, they were more flexible and rapid to implement as they did not have to be reviewed by external actors. Therefore, acts that would have been immediately struck down by Congress or harshly criticised by the American public were permissible in covert operations.

Research by Callanan (2010) confirmed that until the late 1980s it was simpler for the CIA to get funds for covert missions from Congress than for other agencies to get money overtly, even if the intentions were similar. Furthermore, as John Bross, one of the founding fathers of the CIA, argued: “Identification with foreign support can turn what looks like patriotic opposition into what looks like treason. Secrecy also helps to avoid confrontations with other powers who have a stake in the target country” (in Treverton 1988, p. 311). For instance, as it will be clarified in chapter 3, the Pakistani government was unwilling to be openly seen as the intermediary between the CIA and the mujahideen, afraid of the reaction of their powerful neighbour, the Soviet Union, and thus agreed to help only when the operation remained secret. Covertness became a legitimate option to prevent escalation and not to provoke the other country to retaliate (Cogan 1993). For example, the USSR was aware that in Afghanistan the mujahideen were helped by the U.S., but without a clear admission of

responsibility by the Reagan administration, retaliation by the Soviet leadership against the United States would have likely been seen as an unprovoked attack.

The main issue of covert action is the decision-makers' constant presumption that this secrecy will not be broken. Because acting in secret made it more tempting to make riskier decisions, not to consider long-term effects and to avoid ethical questions, information leaks on covert missions led to highly publicised negative public judgements of American interference, both at home and abroad (Treverton 1988). Moreover, domestic and international repercussions escalated in cases where the United States has intervened alone, thus neglecting its allies, and against smaller countries (Treverton 1988). The extensive attempts to overturn the democratic election of Salvador Allende, who became president of a small South American country, are a fitting example.

When uncovered, covert action also betrays the ideals of self-determination and non-intervention that American administrations during the Cold War publicly and proudly portrayed as one of the fundamental differences between the democratic U.S. and the authoritarian Soviet Union (Callanan 2010). As the post-World War II United States had always wished for the spread of democratic practices all around the globe, the power of example was crucial for the success of this ambition. Therefore, the unveiling of secret operations to overthrow foreign governments demonstrated an incongruity within American policy between external behaviour and internal arrangements. These actions damaged both the significance of American ideals domestically and their potential reach abroad (Johnson 2000). Therefore, even though it seems reasonable to argue that certain parties might have approved of secret interference abroad, those who felt misled and betrayed by their own government's actions lost trust in their country's decision-making system.

Lastly, the secrecy and rapidity of implementation mentioned above became a destabilising factor as it was the same circle of policymakers that was entrusted with the

planning and execution of covert operations. This peculiarity limited the availability of other people and organisations to provide further guidance and to conduct a thorough check on the chances of success of a particular mission (Westad 2005). Without being able to take advantage of the myriad of networks created by the post-war Information Revolution, covert action remained devoid of creativity and scrutiny.

# 1. A SHORT HISTORY OF AMERICAN COVERT INTERVENTIONS BEFORE 1970

Although the United States began to sponsor covert action against Communist proliferation starting from the Second World War, the Cold War did not originate at the conclusion of this global conflict, but its seeds had been sowed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the result of two processes (Westad 2017). The first was the acquisition of superpower status by the United States and Russia, which brought with it a shared sense of international mission. The second was the escalation of the ideological divide between capitalism and its most popular alternative, Marxism-Leninism, with the two superpowers becoming their respective leaders. The U.S. in particular developed a sense of uniqueness, of exceptionalism that was to be used at their advantage to recreate the world in their image (Westad 2000). The ideas that encouraged America's interventionism abroad were the same that pushed Americans to conquer the vastness of the North American continent: liberty, anti-collectivism, a reluctance to accept centralised power and a strong conviction in the free market (Westad 2017). These same ideas are to be seen as foundational to the birth of America's intelligence system.

Even though during the Cold War covert action acquired novel planning and implementation models, the CIA started slowly, but not from nothing. The global infrastructure that would be created by the Central Intelligence Agency in the more than four decades of the Cold War was born out of the ashes of World War II. During the war, the United States came into contact with countries that had already developed secret warfare practices. Among them, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) became responsible for the provision of arms and counsel to fighters resisting the German occupation (Prados 1986). While they acted mainly in Europe, for example in Greece and Norway, the SOE also pursued strategic objectives in Southeast Asia.



The British example influenced the creation of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in June 1942. In 1941 the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour created feelings of uneasiness at the political level about not having an agency to gather, interpret and implement intelligence internationally (Callanan 2010). Both engaged in espionage and covert operations, the OSS became involved in the Mediterranean, northern Europe, Myanmar and China running sabotage missions against the Wehrmacht, Nazi Germany's army, and the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces (Liptak 2013). The OSS' philosophy was repeatedly uttered by General Donovan, the sole head of the OSS during its existence: "In a global and totalitarian war, intelligence must be global and totalitarian" (in Weiner 2008, p. 4).

The OSS did not always act independently, but committed itself to training local forces, transforming disorganised groups of rebels into organised guerrilla units. For example, in Burma (modern-day Myanmar) in 1944, OSS agents forged links with the Kachin tribe to create a local force against the Japanese. In one year, the OSS was able to coordinate and equip around 10 000 Kachin, whose help proved fundamental to drive out the Japanese army from the region (Chalou 1995). The network of contacts and the array of tactics established by the OSS helped the CIA later in the decade to jumpstart its own covert program. Other than the limited scale of operations due to the comparatively small number of members (at most thirteen thousand agents), the key difference between the OSS and the CIA was that the latter would be created as a peacetime organisation. After the war, the United States fully abandoned its isolationist posture and instead started to fund pre-emptive subversive operations abroad to further its national interests and its foreign policy agenda. What was the reason for this change of mind?

### ***1.1 The beginning of bipolarity and the need for secret action***

The OSS was disbanded in September 1945 by President Truman, six weeks after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the final surrender of Japan. OSS demobilisation was

carried out despite General Donovan's complaints that the organisation could become part of the U.S. military establishment. According to him, the incumbent administration could have learnt about the "capabilities, intentions and activities of foreign nations" and run "subversive operations" against America's enemies abroad (in Weiner 2008, p. 4). The various components that made up the OSS were redirected to the Department of State and the Department of War (now the Department of Defense). Created as a wartime agency, the OSS was distrusted by both Roosevelt and Truman, who were advised by the chief White House military aide, Colonel Richard Park, that the survival of the Office after the conclusion of the war would have led to the creation of an American Gestapo, Nazi Germany's secret police (Chalou 1995). The hope of a peacetime intelligence agency seemed to vanish.

In a 1945 report declassified only after the end of the Cold War and written by Colonel Park to urge the dismantling of the agency, it was revealed that: OSS operations had been penetrated by Nazi spies in North Africa and Europe; in the summer of 1943 the Japanese discovered OSS plans to steal their code books and thus changed them, leading to a total lack of crucial military information and the death of countless American lives in the Pacific; incorrect OSS intelligence after the fall of Rome in June 1944 led to the death of more than one thousand French troops on the island of Elba, and the list went on (Liptak 2013). These mistakes revealed the spirit of the OSS: a group of amateurs and rookies sent on both daring and delusional missions by a dreamy general. It is understandable why after a global conflict the Truman administration preferred backing down from such project.

However, the rapid deterioration of Soviet-American relations caused by the physical entrenchment of the Soviet Army in the regions east of Berlin reversed this course. This was a violation of the promise made by Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 that Eastern European nations would be allowed to independently decide their future political system. At the Potsdam Conference later that year, the American delegation understood the impossibility

to reconcile U.S. liberal principles with the Soviet call for a security buffer zone along its western borders, and thus began regarding the USSR as an adversary (Callanan 2010). Moreover, the famous ‘Long Telegram’ sent by George Kennan, the American Chargé d’Affaires to Moscow, confirmed the opportunistic nature of Soviet foreign policy. This made clear that future cooperation with the USSR would have solely led to further territorial or political advances by this latter (Westad 2017). It is clear that the United States felt responsible for avoiding this possibility. Therefore, the foreign policy of the Truman administration – the Truman Doctrine – became to be guided by the principle of *containment* in order to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” (Truman 1947). USSR acts abroad started to be seen as threats to global peace.

Truman, who inherited, rather was elected to, his new position, also became troubled by the increasing covert capabilities of the Soviet Union (Corke 2007). The unstable relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union would have likely escalated into open conflict if the same interference into the sovereign rights of other nations would have been done overtly. “If they can, so can we” became the motto for justifying covert operations around the world (Corke 2007). If competition with the USSR was inevitable, then the United States would act as ruthless as them. This belief became reality with the congressional approval of the National Security Act of July 1947, which created the National Security Council (NSC), a Director of Central Intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency to advise the President on foreign and defence affairs.

The Act acknowledged the collection of intelligence worldwide and the necessity of covert action as legitimate parts of the American foreign policy process (Bowman 1998). It empowered the CIA to “perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct” (in Bowman 1998, p. 5). It should be clear that in the Act there is no mention of the terms ‘secret

operation, 'paramilitary operation', 'clandestine operation' or 'covert operation'. However, the above provision was used as a legal loophole to provide the CIA the legal authority for conducting covert operations around the world.

One year later, in June 1948, through National Security Council Directive 10/2, the President accelerated the covert-action capability-building of the CIA by creating a NSC subcommittee, directly dependent on Truman. Chaired by the Director of Central Intelligence – at the time Rear Admiral Hillenkoetter (1947-50) – and composed of representatives of the Departments of State and Defense, the *10/2 Panel* was solely responsible for approving and managing covert operations. The first plans involved more psychological warfare, including sabotage and propaganda, rather than secret wars (Daniels 2020).

In light of these points, it seems obvious why the first covert operations were conducted in Western Europe. The murkiness of the Cold War threatened global stability, but the superpowers did not dare to resort to overt warfare so soon after the end of World War II. The American point of view was that the destruction and desolation of the war left the populations in this region particularly vulnerable to Soviet aggression and subversion (Mistry 2006). The rehabilitation of Western European economies became a means through which to contain communism and the \$13 billion European Recovery Program (or Marshall Plan) the instrument through which to achieve this reconstruction. The objective was to eliminate the social conditions – poverty and inequality – that would have permitted the growth of communism (Miller 1983). The restoration of Western Europe as a fortress of capitalism and democracy did not merely serve as an end in itself but represented an ideological and physical advance of the United States against the USSR.

### *1.1.1 The Italian election of 1948*

The covert operation implemented in Italy became the springboard for later large-scale missions. After the war, the Italian peninsula “had become [on the ideological level] a microcosm of the wider Cold War conflict” (Callanan 2010, p. 24). The Fronte Popolare Democratico (Democratic Popular Front) coalition, combining the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) (Italian Communist Party) and the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) (Italian Socialist Party), seemingly enjoyed equal political popularity as the centre-right Democrazia Cristiana (DC) (Christian Democratic Party). The eventuality that the left-wing coalition would triumph at the national elections of April 1948 alarmed the United States. Truman reacted to this possibility by arguing that the Iron Curtain would have moved as far as Bordeaux and The Hague (Weiner 2008). Although an exaggeration of the true impact that the results could have had in Western Europe, his concerns were a reflection of the paranoia and tension of those times. A socialist victory in Italy posed a threat to American attempts to reshape the region according to democratic and liberal values (Prados 1986). Moreover, Italy’s strategic geographical position – central in the Mediterranean Sea, flanking the Balkans and dominating the Near East – was too precious to be left in Soviet hands. Therefore, the goal was simple: to avoid the victory of the Fronte Popolare Democratico.

A period of strikes and social agitation promoted by the Fronte Popolare Democratico in the summer and autumn months of 1947 finally convinced the Truman administration that the economic aid provided by the Marshall Plan was not enough to reduce the appeal of the Italian Communists and Socialists. In late November 1947, Truman signed Directive NSC 1/1, which mapped out both the overt and covert actions to take in Italy. The covert measures involved a disinformation campaign and the injection of untraceable funds in the pockets of prominent DC politicians, other centrist lawmakers and the priests of Azione Cattolica (Catholic Action), a lay Catholic organisation tightly connected to the Vatican (Beccaro 2022).

As a matter of fact, the Catholic Church, aware of the pull it had on the Italian populace, represented a crucial player in swaying public opinion towards voting for the DC. From the latter months of 1947, the spokesmen of Pope Pius XII focused their efforts on convincing Fronte Popolare Democratico sympathisers that it was impossible to be a member of the Catholic Church while at the same time belonging to the PCI (Beccaro 2022). In other words, they faced an ultimate choice: embrace Christianity or become atheists. Considering Italy's strong religious roots, it is certain that some that were hesitant about voting for the Fronte Popolare Democratico were dissuaded from doing so. Furthermore, a portion of the American funds were used to shut down any minority internal to the Vatican who disagreed with such interference in Italian politics (Mistry 2006).

The CIA funnelled money to those in politics and in the media industry who could present to the Italian electorate the United States as a friend and as a guarantor of democracy. Most of the funds were laundered from the European Recovery Program through a secret codicil in the original Act that allowed the CIA to scrape 5% of the total sum. \$685 million (around \$8.65 billion in 2023) of untraceable cash were made available to the CIA to conduct political warfare around the world, in particular in countries like Italy that in the eyes of the 10/2 Panel looked close to Soviet subversion (Mistry 2011). The distribution of money would be carried out by the CIA Office of Policy Coordination, a name that would not have raised suspicions domestically.

In April 1948, the Christian Democrats took 48.5% of the votes cast, winning an absolute majority in both chambers, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi was able to form a government that totally excluded the Socialists and Communists. However, arguing that the covert operation was the sole deliverer of the DC success would be an overstatement. Indeed, not only covert action in Italy complemented a much larger overt propaganda program, but developments in a foreign country in the early

months of 1948 greatly damaged the chances of a Communist victory in Italy. In February 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) seized control over the government, inaugurating a period of Communist rule lasting until 1989. Although they had conquered a relative majority in the 1946 elections, by the fall of 1947 the KSČ had antagonised large swathes of the electorate (Duchacek 1950). A season of extrajudicial arrests and executions began which culminated with the coup of 21-25 February 1948.

The Soviet expansion in Czechoslovakia succeeded in increasing domestic and international support for the Marshall Plan, and justified more covert intervention in Italy (Ellwood 1993). The events in Czechoslovakia empowered the black propaganda campaign to diminish the appeal of the far left. One month before the Italian elections, Truman authorised the intensification of overt and covert efforts with the signing of NSC Directives 1/3 and 4/A (Del Pero 2001). They empowered CIA agents in Italy to spread unattributable political pamphlets and plant stories in national newspapers highlighting the brutality of the Red Army in Eastern Europe. The suggestion was that the same would have occurred there if the Fronte Popolare Democratico won the election. Lastly, forged letters and documents were sent to PSI members claiming to be from the PCI leadership to drive a wedge between the two parties (Brocchi 2022). The aim was clearly to portray the Fronte Popolare Democratic as the antithesis of democratic government and disrupt the internal balance within the coalition. And surely on 18 April 1948, the Partito Comunista Italiano, headed by Palmiro Togliatti, was defeated by the Democrazia Cristiana of De Gasperi. The perceived success of the covert campaign in Italy and the start of the first Cold-War proxy war in the Korean peninsula prompted a higher demand for covert operations and thus led to standardised organisations and procedures to execute large-scale clandestine acts (Ellwood 1993).

## ***1.2 1950s: Military coups in Iran and Guatemala***

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the new Soviet leadership was aware that solely concentrating on Europe would not have led to an advancement in their position, even more so because of the financial aid provided by the American Marshall Plan. Thus, it became interested in the Third World where it saw a power vacuum as the British and French colonial empires were disintegrating (Scott 2004). The CIA, worried that the USSR influence would lead to socialist upheavals and endanger their interests, resorted to covert action to maintain the balance of power in their favour. It is in this phase that the Agency gained its predominance among the other American intelligence agencies, a gradual process rather than a position bestowed at its establishment. The new Director of Central Intelligence, Allen W. Dulles (1953-61), promised to accomplish the Cold War strategy of the new Eisenhower administration. Containment was not enough; the Iron Curtain should have been *rolled back* to limit the danger posed by the Soviet Union (Daniels 2020).

Under Eisenhower (1953-61), the CIA managed political, psychological and paramilitary warfare in 48 states for a total of 170 large-scale covert operations (Weiner 2008). The guidelines for clandestine operations remained the same throughout the 1950s: any regime that did not openly allied itself with the United States would have to be removed. This was due to the restricted circle of policymakers with the power to settle on a definite path on this secretive topic. It is not an exaggeration arguing that President Eisenhower decided on most covert action matters in private conversations with the Dulles brothers (Prados 1986). Dulles' brother, John F. Dulles, was the President's closest foreign policy advisor and was appointed Secretary of State following Eisenhower's election in November 1952. Their aggressive belief in the power of the U.S. to remake the map of the world according to American interests shaped the foreign policy of the Eisenhower administration.



The secret intervention in the domestic affairs of non-aligned countries was a consequence of the administration's bipolar worldview. The open neutralism of non-aligned countries was regarded as a fluid condition, meaning that sooner or later they would have irrevocably picked one side (Callanan 2010). Therefore, Eisenhower and his advisors took action whenever it appeared that a certain regime would have eventually moved under the Soviet sphere of influence. The earliest attempt towards rollback happened in Iran when the CIA, with the support of MI6, the British Secret Service, orchestrated a coup against the democratically elected anti-Western Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953.

### *1.2.1 Operation Ajax*

It has been argued that the CIA's decision to intervene in Iran came at the start of the oil crisis, which began in late March 1951 when the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament, approved a legislative proposal to nationalise the *Anglo-Iranian Oil Company* (AIOC), an outcome that had been strongly backed by Mossadegh for years (Dannreuther and Ostrowski 2022). However, the idea to overthrow Mossadegh was first and foremost a MI6 plan (Etges 2011). Before the 1953 coup, the United States had not engaged in coup sponsoring, but had only offered technical advice in Syria in 1949 and in Cuba in 1952 (Weiner 2008). As a matter of fact, the biggest losses from the above-mentioned nationalisation were British as AIOC's production contract heavily favoured their side. It gave them total control over the extraction, refining and shipping of oil in Southern Iran and, even though the money paid to Iran accounted for more than 50% of the country's national budget, through the AIOC the British government received ten times that amount (Etges 2011). Moreover, when the Majlis demanded more favourable terms, the British merely offered superficial changes. In the fall of 1951, the government led by Winston Churchill prepared for military intervention, but was dissuaded from doing so by Truman, who

persuaded him to rely on diplomatic and economic measures. Indeed, a global economic boycott might have brought the Iranians back to the negotiating table.

However, the newly elected Eisenhower administration took a more aggressive stance after the pro-Western Iranian monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was reduced to a mere puppet by Mossadegh, who was allowed to rule by decree and cut diplomatic relations with the UK in October 1952. MI6 agents sent to Washington in November 1952, aware of President Eisenhower's attitude towards communist takeovers among non-aligned countries, insisted on the spread of Communism in the region rather than focusing on regaining control over oil reserves (Etges 2011). The result was the execution of *Project TPAJAX*. To prepare public opinion for a shift in foreign policy, American mass media began portraying Iran as a rogue state and its leader as dishonourable and distrustful (Matherly 2013). Then, it is appropriate asking why the U.S. did not intervene overtly. The most probable reason is that at the time the Korean War, which in total took around 40 thousand American lives, was coming to an end. The beginning of a new conflict rather than the reaching of a negotiated settlement would have attracted serious criticism and hurt Eisenhower's approval rates.

Although several CIA files on the coup have not been made public, it is undeniable that without the CIA's direction the Iranians would not have toppled the regime. The internal situation was already unstable as Mossadegh had alienated his closest advisors, including the speaker of Majlis, Kashani (Israeli 2013). Nonetheless, it was CIA agents that drafted the royal decrees (farmans in Persian) that ordered the dismissal of Mossadegh and delivered them to the Shah, ensuring him that the Army would have backed him. Furthermore, to ensure that the political establishment, the military and Iranian society in general would support such regime change, the CIA spent at least \$1 million (\$11.5 million in 2023 dollars) bribing officials, policymakers, journalists and even gang leaders (Kim 2005). In the months preceding the coup, a propaganda campaign designed to paint Mossadegh as a sympathiser of the Tudeh Party –

the Iranian Communist Party – and of the USSR was launched. Headlines read: “Mossadeq is an enemy of Islam ... Mossadeq is deliberately leading the country into economic collapse ... Mossadeq has been corrupted by power (in Weiner 2008, p. 98). The coup took place between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August 1953, resulting in the appointment of General Zahedi as the new Prime Minister and the incarceration of Mossadegh.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged that “the coup was clearly a setback for Iran’s political development [for the Shah’s regime] brutally repressed political dissent” (in Etges 2011, p. 495). Pahlavi dismantled democratic institutions, suppressed political parties, rigged elections, censored the press, limited freedom of speech and depended on the CIA-trained SAVAK, his secret police, to murder thousands of alleged Communists (Matherly 2013). Because the Shah was domestically perceived as a puppet of the United States government, anti-American feelings grew in Iran and in the surrounding countries, leading to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the installation of a fundamentalist and radical Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As the reader will notice, this pattern will consistently be the same after the conclusion of most U.S.-backed Cold-War covert operations.

### *1.2.2 Operation PBSuccess*

The so-called Golden Age of the CIA was also inaugurated by the 1954 CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the Guatemalan left-wing government of Jacopo Arbenz Guzmán. He had won an absolute majority of the votes in the November 1950 elections by advocating a platform of broad reforms of the Guatemalan agricultural sector to break monopolies. The most comprehensive one, the 1952 Agrarian Reform Bill (Decree 900), expropriated almost a third of the lands – 234 000 acres – of the American *United Fruit Company* (UFCO) (now Chiquita) to redistribute it among unemployed Guatemalans (Schlesinger and Kinzer 2020). The reform only applied to fallow lands above a certain size, and as it was a common practice for large

producers to leave prime land uncultivated for future exploitation, UFCO had a lot of it. At the time, not only United Fruit was the largest employer and banana exporter in the country, but it also controlled the transport of all imports and exports both by land through its ownership of the International Railway of Central America and by sea by controlling Puerto Barrios, Guatemala's only major port, and the Great White Fleet, steamships carrying most Guatemalan goods in and out the country (Immerman 1980). More a nationalist than a Communist, Arbenz was trying to transform Guatemala from a feudal to a capitalist state, which could rely on its own resources for internal and external development.

Although these reforms were nonviolent and seemed to follow ideals of peaceful democratic change, in addition to the fact that the Arbenz government offered compensation to United Fruit in the form of government bonds, the United States began to worry about a potential Communist takeover in Guatemala and the means to avoid such a possibility. Contrary to the American belief that all Communists abroad were directly commanded by Moscow and that Communism could not coexist with democracy, Arbenz was convinced that the legalisation of a national Communism Party would have led to a decrease in its popularity after peasants and workers saw its disruptive reform proposals (Meers 1992). For this reason, he allowed the creation of a Guatemalan Communist Party (PGT) in 1952 to strengthen his domestic popularity. On the contrary, viewing this move as a sign of Soviet expansionism, the American administration was persuaded to act before the country turned communist. Moreover, the economic factor – UFCO's business interests – was also relevant in shaping U.S. policy towards Guatemala. The actual and future loss in profits and stock value prompted UFCO to wage a propaganda campaign within the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to depose Arbenz. However, the emphasis was placed on the supposed international conspiracy that the entire expropriation issue was part of a larger Communist strategy to overrun Guatemala

(Immerman 1980). In other words, UFCO played on the U.S. government's fear of allowing the development of a client state of the Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere.

The planning of Operation PBFortune, approved by Truman in July 1952, was the result of such encouragement. It entailed supplying arms and money to Guatemalan dissidents led by an exiled Army officer, Carlos Castillo Armas, who also provided the CIA with a list of Guatemalan Communists that should have been immediately killed in the event of a successful anti-Communist coup (Haines 1995). According to the plan, the exiles would have invaded the country with the help of the right-wing governments of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Venezuela (Haines 1995). However, in the fall of 1952, news about the coup began circulating in Guatemala and thus the CIA was forced to terminate the operation.

Albeit the plan was shelved, the election of a new President, characterised by more confrontational foreign policy plans, brought Guatemala back on the table. Indeed, by the summer of 1953, the administration and the CIA were again focusing on finding a satisfactory scheme to dispose of Arbenz. The move was also provoked by Arbenz's decision in March 1953 to expel from the country all suspected subversives after a group of right-wing insurgents attempted to occupy a military camp, a consequence of which was that the CIA lost all assets in the country (Schlesinger and Kinzer 2020). Operation PBSuccess was the codename for the mission carried out by the Eisenhower administration which successfully removed Arbenz from power and installed Carlos Castillo Armas. Frank Wisner, the Deputy Director in charge of the CIA *Directorate of Plans* (the former Office of Policy Coordination), was placed in charge of the operation. He had already been fundamental in the toppling of Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran (Callanan 2010).

Operation PBSuccess involved paramilitary, political and psychological tactics. While the U.S. government conducted a propaganda campaign in the Organisation of American States (OAS) designed to criticise and isolate Arbenz, the CIA trained a small rebel army of 480

Guatemalan exiles in El Salvador and Honduras. Through a radio station established during Operation PBFortune, this force was advertised to the Arbenz government as a mere spearhead for a much larger invasion (Moye 1998). Moreover, a list of targets to assassinate was intentionally leaked to encourage defections both in the army and in the government (Haines 1995). Everything was done to reduce the likelihood that Arbenz would fight back and to force him to voluntarily resign or not to resist deposition. Indeed, when in mid-June 1954 the men led by Castillo Armas advanced into Guatemala both by land and air, Arbenz grounded the Air Force and to silence the radio broadcast ordered a power cut (Meers 1992). This generated the chaos and panic that the operation was supposed to create and triggered a response from the armed forces, who overthrew Arbenz and eleven days later gave power to Castillo Armas.

Guatemala entered a period of right-wing dictatorships, which culminated in a civil war against several leftist rebel groups that lasted until 1996. Because the international reaction was highly negative and denounced the United States as a colonial power, the Eisenhower administration launched Operation PBHistory. From July to September 1954, CIA agents studied hundreds of thousands of official papers to demonstrate that Arbenz's actions were dictated by the Soviet leadership, thus giving grounds for Operation PBSuccess as necessary to avoid the establishment of a Soviet outpost in the Western Hemisphere. The operation was a failure to the extent that it did not find any evidence to support the claim that Arbenz had been puppeteered by the Soviet leadership, which at the time was in fact in a struggle for power between Khrushchev and Malenkov (Taubman 2003). Nevertheless, the large presence of documents found denouncing the aggressive approach taken by the United States in Central America was used for years to discredit Arbenz and justify the U.S.-backed overthrow (Moye 1998).

It seemed that wherever diplomacy had failed, covert action could solve U.S. foreign policy stalemates. Moreover, covert action successes contributed to draw the attention away

from communist advances in other parts of the world. For instance, the operation in Guatemala came around the same time that French forces in Indochina were being defeated by the communist Việt Minh of Hồ Chí Minh. The possibility of a Western power being prevailed over by communist forces prompted the Eisenhower administration to attack the global communist challenge somewhere else, that is Guatemala (Prados 1986). Therefore, it is clear that the U.S. government understood the two crises as interrelated phenomena originating from the same source, the Soviet Union.

The entity overseeing all these efforts, the 10/2 Panel, was renamed *Special Group 5412* in the early years of the Eisenhower administration in order to “counter any threat of a party or individuals directly or indirectly responsive to Communist control to achieve dominant power in a free world country” (in Little 2004, p. 672). In other words, the United States would act at its discretion not only in states that were clearly influenced by the Soviet Union, but also in contexts in which unfriendly policies would obstruct their path to becoming the only global superpower. However, after a sequence of successful operations in the Middle East and Latin America with few and mostly negligible negative effects, the 1960s began with a mission failure in Central America that made the United States reevaluate the public dangers of covert action.

### ***1.3 Cuba: The Bay of Pigs disaster***

The 1960s began with the election of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States and the continued pursuit of covert interventionism. However, the aggressive stance that characterised Eisenhower’s foreign policy was softened as, in the words of Kennedy’s Secretary of State Dean Rusk: “We weren’t really bothered by third world countries that refused to take sides in the Cold War” (in Callanan 2010, p. 138-9). Therefore, intervention would only become necessary in countries whose leaders’ admiration for Marxism-Leninism would likely

lead to a communist takeover. As a result, the adoption of *flexible response* as the guiding principle of his administration's foreign policy entailed a more comprehensive development of covert abilities. Other than strengthening political, economic and psychological warfare, the CIA, together with the Department of Defense, expanded their paramilitary capabilities. An extension of Eisenhower's doctrine of massive retaliation would have solely hurt American interests and led to global destruction.

The CIA continued to play a fundamental role in the major crises that the Kennedy administration handled. It did so even more since Kennedy downgraded the National Security Council to favour a direct contact between the Oval Office and the Directorate of Plans, the clandestine arm of the Agency (Beschloss 2016). This move proved destabilising as it removed the biggest safeguard – the NSC – to hold the CIA in check. Moreover, Kennedy also abolished two advisory boards – the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) and the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities (PCBFIA) – that served as coordination and watchdog groups for covert operations (Beschloss 2016). This decision removed two potential scapegoats to blame in case an operation went sideways. Deprived of restraints, the Directorate of Plans developed an inclination for overestimating its successes and downplaying its fiascos, for underestimating its enemies and excluding espionage and counterintelligence agents from the planning stages of an operation (Scott 2004). It was during this period that the ill-conceived operation at the Cuban Bay of Pigs was planned and executed, resulting in a serious questioning of the ability of the CIA to successfully engage in covert action.

Few other operations in the history of the CIA failed as badly as the covert efforts to confront and unseat Fidel Castro. The guerrillas commanded by a young Fidel Castro had toppled the oppressive and corrupt Batista regime two years earlier, the conclusion of an armed struggle that had begun in 1953 when they conducted an unsuccessful attack against some military barracks in Santiago de Cuba. The Eisenhower administration looked with optimism



at the new leadership, adopting a wait-and-see policy. By the beginning of the new decade, its posture had already changed. Two developments worried the United States. First, Castro began engaging in anti-American rhetoric, moving closer to the Soviet side by signing a commercial agreement in February 1960, but still fiercely arguing against becoming a USSR puppet (Escalante 1995). Second, as Arbenz had done years before, he enacted expropriations of foreign-owned sugar plantations (Higgins 1987). Therefore, it is probable that Castro imagined the response of the U.S. by looking at what had been done in Guatemala years before.

Indeed, the initial plan to bring about the fall of the Castro regime closely resembled that of Operation PBSuccess (Husain 2005). Cuba needed to be isolated with overt political and diplomatic efforts before launching a paramilitary operation from outside the country. Alongside this plan, the CIA also contemplated assassinating Castro to leave the country leaderless and in disarray. The Special Group 5412 argued that the death of Castro would have justified an overt intervention on the part of the United States as the Cuban Communist Party would have likely exploited his murder to gain power over the country (Dunne 2011). However, as multiple assassination attempts did not bear fruit, all resources were redirected towards the larger clandestine operation, which was gradually turning into a major amphibious invasion. The original policy paper, drafted on 17 March 1960, focused on the development of a guerrilla infiltration programme, but its language was ambiguous enough for a larger venture to become possible "if and when the situation [required it]" (in Ranelagh 1986, p. 351). This programme was preceded by a propaganda campaign to shift Cubans' public perception of the new Castro regime and thus facilitate the paramilitary offensive. However, this latter fell short of expectations as the rebel force, made up of less than one hundred men trained in sabotage tactics, was captured within forty-eight hours of entering Cuba.

The Directorate of Plans then was faced with a decision: expand the programme or cancel it altogether. At the end of November 1960, Eisenhower formally approved the

transformation of the operation by authorising the training of up to two thousand men and of a small air force (Dunne 2011). This choice carried the evident risk that secrecy could not be maintained throughout the preparation and implementation stages. President Kennedy hesitantly inherited this state of affairs, but was unable to put an end to it because of internal pressures coming from those who mostly had to gain from a successful operation: the CIA's Directorate of Plans. CIA Director Dulles convinced the President that postponing the venture would have hurt the credibility of American resolve and that the trained Cuban exiles would have divulged to the press the activities they had been involved in (Freedman 2000). Moreover, Kennedy had run an anti-Castro campaign and going back so soon on his promise would have attracted considerable criticism from both his own party and the Republican Party.

The final plan was devised and authorised merely a month before the mission started. Kennedy had vetoed the more feasible Trinidad plan, which involved landing the rebel force near Trinidad, a coastal city considered a breeding ground of opposition to Castro, located close to the Escambray Mountains, an ideal refuge in case the landings failed (Dunne 2011). The flawed nature of the ill-conceived alternative became soon apparent. When the Cuban exiles – dubbed Brigade 2506 – landed on three broad beaches at the Bay of Pigs on the southwestern coast of Cuba on April 17, they did not find, as expected, weak defences ready to defect to their side. They were welcomed by the well-equipped Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces. Moreover, the presumption that the terrain at the Bay of Pigs would have been suitable for guerrilla warfare came from survey maps drawn at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Weiner 2008). On the other hand, the rebels found it impossible to gain ground through mangrove roots and mud. Nevertheless, only a small number was killed – about one hundred – with the others being imprisoned and then released back to the United States. It has to be recognised that an overt intervention would have led to many more casualties. A declassified memorandum estimated “up to 18,500 casualties in the first ten days of operation” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1962).

The idea that merely 1500 men would have been able to overrun Castro's army depended on the assessment agreed upon by the American executive. Indeed, officials within the Kennedy administration firmly believed that, since the Castro regime was communist and rejected democratic practices, most Cubans must have been disapproving and thus would have joined the CIA-sponsored rebellion (Husain 2005). The administration's failure to comprehend the real context and to fix the worsening situation by for example launching an overt military intervention or calling off the operation pushed the Soviet leadership to test American resolve. The outcome was a near nuclear escalation during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

The debacle in Cuba forced Kennedy to reduce the amount of large-scale covert operations globally to avoid further criticism on the part of Congress and the American public (Rakove 2012). Furthermore, the primary responsibility for paramilitary operations was transferred from the CIA to the Pentagon in the fall of 1961 in an attempt to prevent such an ill-conceived mission to be sanctioned again (Johnson 1964). Wishing to exercise more oversight over covert operations, Kennedy dismissed Dulles as Director of Central Intelligence and replaced him with John McCone, an engineer and former chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, in order to give a more managerial tone to the conduct of covert action (Rakove 2012). Moreover, the Special Group 5412 was renamed *Committee 303* by President Johnson in 1964 in an effort to separate the failures of the past from future operations.

After the Cuban fiasco and above all in an attempt to deflect attention from the overt U.S. escalation of the unpopular Vietnam War, a fundamental role in casting covert operations in a sympathetic light both at home and abroad was played by Hollywood studios. Indeed, in 1966 the television series 'Mission: Impossible' was released, skyrocketing to the top of the Nielsen ratings and running for seven seasons and a total of 171 episodes until 1973. In each episode, secret agent Jim Phelps was entrusted, together with his small team of covert operators, with a dangerous mission to avert international crises and fight global evil. The

characters' conduct reflected and tended to normalise among the American public the same actions performed by CIA agents: lying, falsifying documents, sabotaging governments, plotting assassinations and breaking civil and criminal law (Little 2004).

Furthermore, the series sometimes fictionalised real accounts of covert operations to reinforce the idea that the United States was coerced to act against the ambitions of an expansionist superpower. For instance, in one 1969 episode, the Impossible Mission Force was tasked with the reinstatement of a pro-Western monarchy after the monarch had been deposed by anti-American antagonists. After watching the episode, anyone with a basic knowledge about Operation Ajax would agree that the rescue of the fictional King Selim closely resembled the overthrow of Mossadegh and the comeback of the Shah in 1953. By the time this episode aired, 'Mission: Impossible' was already among the most popular television shows around the world, from Mexico to Italy to Iran itself (Little 2004). Because these agents were portrayed as working towards global stability, the series was meant to affirm the Cold War idea that the ends justify the means (Little 2004). It helped spread the message that covert action was an essential tool of foreign policymaking in those decades of superpower competition.

The 'can do' reputation that the CIA built in the two decades after its creation was mostly attributable to a general lack of negative response from Congress and the American public (Scott 2004). It meant that, although details on covert operations became public every so often, they accepted the need for such action. Therefore, both Republican and Democrat presidents saw fit to turn to the Agency for activities that, handled overtly, would have ruined their public standing as global upholders of self-determination and non-interference. However, as evident in this last subchapter, due to operational requirements, missions had to grow bigger. This meant more field agents, funds, logistical facilities and contributions from other agencies (Isenberg 1989). This reduced the chance that they would remain secret and conclude successfully. In retrospect, the invasion of Arbenz's Guatemala was comparatively easier to

accomplish than that of Castro's Cuba. America's enemies had the time to examine and learn lessons from previous covert operations in order not to repeat the mistakes made by other revolutionaries or leaders. They tightened control over the army and mobilised the citizenry to ensure their loyalty, while striking alliances with like-minded countries similarly concerned with America's hidden hand (Isenberg 1989). The Nixon administration, inaugurated in January 1969, inherited this complex state of affairs and rapidly moved to focus on a country in the Western Hemisphere that seemed ready to democratically elect its first socialist president: Chile.

## 2. CHILE

*“I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people”,*  
Henry Kissinger, former National Security Advisor (June 27, 1970)

The following chapter analyses in depth CIA-sponsored covert action in Chile from the period preceding the presidential election of 1970 until the weeks after the September 11, 1973, coup, which resulted in the overthrow of the socialist government of Salvador Allende and in his death. The chapter attempts to identify to what extent the CIA's covert acts led to the internal instability of Chile and to the bloody conclusion of Allende's term. It investigates the various tactics devised by the Nixon administration to discredit and damage Allende's presidency so as to force him to resign or make him assent to his deposition.

Most academic studies on the overthrow of Salvador Allende's government sustain one of two theories, either that the coup was entirely the result of domestic forces, for example by Devine (2014), or that the CIA should take the blame for most that occurred in Chile during that time, as argued by Kornbluh (2016). Those, like William D. Rogers (2004), once Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs under Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State, that argue for the innocence of the U.S. government because of a lack of major evidence are confirmation that the debate has still not been settled. The development of events and the recent declassification of hundreds of documents from the mid-1950s to 1973 reveals a more complicated and varied story.

Covert action in Chile can be classified into three distinct phases, the last of which is the central focus of this chapter, namely 1970-3, the years of Allende's presidency. During the other two periods, early efforts were made to avoid Allende being elected to the highest post of the state during the 1958 and the 1964 electoral seasons. These latter are discussed in a

separate subchapter to clarify that the United States was worried about a potential Socialist victory in Chile for quite some time.

## ***2.1 A general picture of Chile***

Before looking at the CIA's efforts to undermine Allende's socialist rule, it would be best comprehending why, out of all the countries south of the United States, Chile was probably the most unlikely to be threatened by Soviet subversion. Since it gained independence in 1818 from Spain, the country enjoyed relatively stable periods of parliamentary rule, only interrupted three times when armed violence erupted. As a result of the first two instances, both occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chilean Parliament obtained larger prerogatives to the detriment of the Presidency (Collier and Sater 1996). The last interruption to democratic rule lasted 8 years, starting in 1924 when a group of officers led by General Luis Altamirano deposed reformist president Arturo Alessandri. However, even under military rule, the system was modernised by introducing direct elections for the presidency and separating by law the church from the state. In 150 years, Chile developed into a model republic, an instance rarely seen in South America, to the point of being called "the England of South America" by The Times and Chileans being referred to as "the Prussians of South America" by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (in Lawson 2017, p. 251). From 1932 until the coup d'état of 1973, multiparty rule was not interrupted. The armed forces of Chile took on a non-partisan and non-interventionist role to be violated only if the institutions upheld by the Constitution would be in grave danger (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1976).

Further evidence of Chile's democratic character is offered by the Polity98 scores associated with the domestic situation within various countries before the U.S. intervened covertly. According to these, Chile had a democratic score of 6 and an autocratic score of 0, while for example Iran and Guatemala had lower democratic scores and higher autocratic

scores at the time of American intervention (Kim 2005). Moreover, the communist tradition in Chile was completely different from that of other Latin American countries or in Western Europe. While most commonly communist parties stemmed out of the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, the *Partido Comunista de Chile* (Communist Party of Chile) had a less doctrinal base, formed by the impoverished masses working in the mines of nitrate and copper in northern Chile (Haslam 2005). Although they maintained an attitude of respect towards the Soviet Union, they were convinced of the power of parliamentary politics for the attainment of their policy goals, and thus openly declared their sound commitment to respect the democratic system (Haslam 2005).

All this makes it clear that, at the time of the start of Allende's term in 1970, Chile was considered on the path to soon be a mature, consolidated and multiparty democracy. It becomes of fundamental importance being aware of the democratic and constitutional nature of Chilean politics to later on regard the assessments made by the American intelligence community as unjustifiably paranoid about the possibility of a Communist takeover following Allende's election.

## **2.2 *Who was Salvador Allende?***

Salvador Guillermo Allende Gossens (1908-1973) trained as a medical student from 1926 to 1932, but quickly understood his passion for domestic social policies after coming into contact with the poor masses of illiterates during his time with the Chilean ambulance service. In 1938, he became the undersecretary general of the *Partido Socialista de Chile* (PS) (Socialist Party of Chile) and one year later was chosen as the new Minister for Health and Social Security under President Pedro Aguirre Cerda (1938-41). In 1943, he was nominated secretary-general of the Socialist Party. It seemed that his path to the presidency was set early. Referring to himself as a "socialist parliamentarian", Allende had always been scrutinised as a pragmatic



politician, not guided by strong theoretical foundations and lacking an aptitude for administration. After Allende's election, former president Eduardo Frei Montalva, once a close friend of Allende, acknowledged how "Allende was a man of his word, [...] weak on ideology but strong on political tactics" (in Haslam 2005, p. 5). U.S. Ambassador to Chile Edward Korry remarked that he had "neither the temperament nor the intellectual experience to sustain systematic management" (Korry, 28 April 1971, in Haslam 2005, p. 4). But he was also labelled "one of the most astute politicians and parliamentarians in a nation whose favourite pastime is kaffeeklatsch politics", alluding to the informality of Chilean politics (Kornbluh 2016, p. 1).

In the early 1950s, his political aspirations were curbed by the depressing results of the 1952 presidential election, in which Allende representing only the Socialist Party, as the Communist Party had been banned in 1948, got 5.5% of the vote. However, the paranoia lingering within American administrations since the late 1940s, as evident in, for example, the case for interfering with the Italian elections of 1948, did not remain confined to Western Europe. As already seen, the 1950s saw a wave of covert operations to depose governments that did not explicitly side with the American administration in office. It was in this climate that Salvador Allende became to be noticed by the U.S. government.

In March 1954, at a meeting in Caracas of the Organization of American States, the U.S. promoted the collective signing of an anti-Communist resolution. This decision can be understood as part of their effort to publicly isolate the Guatemalan government of Arbenz, before physically intervening to topple it (Westad 2017). Allende responded to such initiative describing it as leaving the "impression that the mountains of [Central and South American] countries are infested with communists, [...] that the small country of Guatemala threatens the existence of the largest of the bourgeois countries" (in Hove 2007, p. 633). His words portrayed the United States as an unscrupulous nation, ready to interfere with the domestic sphere of any country that would not follow America's dictates. It is clear that Allende's main concern was

the respect for the sovereignty and integrity of Latin American states, and their autonomy in deciding how to shape their future. And indeed, Eisenhower's operation in Guatemala only served to radicalise these opinions and convince him to develop a policy program closer to socialist countries and further away from the Washington-led system (Qureshi 2009).

It is in these years that he came up with his plan for Chile, his *via pacifica al socialismo*. His belief that a socialist transformation of the political system could be reached through peaceful means remained at the core of his politics until the end. At a rally in Havana, Cuba, in December 1972, 9 months before dying in a coup d'état, he reminded the crowd that "the shortest path towards the qualitative transformation of the current political system does not necessarily have to occur by way of the collapse and destruction of the prevailing constitutional order" (Allende, 13 December 1972). He was conscious of the vulnerable masses of disempowered voters, surviving on meagre salaries and lacking a basic education. Most of them mined Chile's most important export – copper – for the most important customer – the United States (World Bank 1980). Since the 1920s, ownership was almost exclusively in the hands of American companies. For this reason, Allende favoured 'Chileanisation', namely the nationalisation of foreign-owned copper industries to first halt the stagnation of the economy and then improve it (Boorstein 1977). This scared the United States.

### **2.3 *American covert action before Allende's election***

Merely writing about American efforts to avoid and then, once unsuccessful, to remove Allende as president of Chile would reveal an incomplete picture of America's interference in the domestic affairs of this South American country. As a matter of fact, Allende had been source of worries and fears for American politicians from the time of the Guatemala operation. However, intervention became a reality only in 1958 when the *Frente de Acción Popular* (FRAP) (Popular Action Front), a coalition formed by the Partido Socialista de Chile, the

Partido Comunista de Chile and other small left-wing parties that presented Allende as their common candidate for the 1958 and 1964 presidential elections, finished as the runner-up only 3 percentage points – about 33'500 votes – behind Jorge Alessandri, the independent candidate for the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party) and the Partido Conservador (Conservative Party).

It now seemed to close to reality the possibility of a FRAP victory and therefore the democratic electoral process alone would not be enough to keep Allende away from the presidency. Indeed, in 1961 the Kennedy administration created an electoral committee to coordinate in secret partnerships with key Chilean political parties (Church Report 1975, p. 16). It was composed of the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, the Western Hemisphere Division Chief of the CIA, the National Security Advisor and the Special Assistant to the President (Church Report 1975, p. 16). This high-level effort unveiled a growing anxiety within the American executive, which likely soared when in 1963 the FRAP vote increased in a special congressional election in a typically conservative district (Knott 1996).

Therefore, as the 1964 election approached, it became obvious that more concrete measures to counteract the FRAP coalition needed to be launched. Readers must remember that, according to the Chilean Constitution of 1925, presidents were elected for one six-year term with no possibility of immediate re-election. Furthermore, in case of no candidate achieving an absolute majority, the Congreso Nacional de Chile (National Congress) decided between the two candidates with the most votes. In the three instances Congress had to decide (1946, 1952 and 1958), the candidate that obtained the relative majority was chosen, thus establishing a political precedent for future cases, as it will be for the 1970 election (Cusack 1977). Therefore, Alessandri was not a viable candidate. Through the CIA, the Kennedy administration covertly spent almost \$4 million (almost \$22 million in 2023 dollars) to fund fifteen covert projects during the 1964 election season (Church Report 1975). Then president and presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson spent less for his 1964 campaign to successfully

become the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States after the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 (Bevins 2020). This curious detail is evocative of the perceived importance among the Washington elites to prevent the election of a Communist or Socialist nominee. Surely, The New York Times reported the day before election day that “no other foreign election since the Italian elections of 1948 [...] had caused as much anxiety in Washington as the one in Chile” (September 3, 1964, p. 11). Early reports (Stern 1973, p. 6; Petras and Morley 1975, p. 20) placed the amount spent at around \$20 million (\$113.5 million in 2023 dollars). Such implausible estimates reveal the lack of secrecy around Chile’s covert operations, but also of proper investigation to accurately expose the extent of interference by the U.S. government.

Covert action took the form of direct payments to the campaign of the candidate for the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC) (Christian Democratic Party), Eduardo Frei Montalva. The choice to support the PDC rather than right-wing parties, as it had been in 1958, was provoked by an external development of events: the 1959 Cuban revolution that brought to power Fidel Castro. As a matter of fact, in case of the conservative Alessandri government’s failure to deliver on key policy promises, the electorate would have decisively swung to the left (Gustafson 2007). Therefore, the only viable alternative was fostering centrist political parties, whose primary goals included the improvement of the living conditions of the middle classes. This belief was strongly held by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a historian and intellectual, and Special Assistant to President Kennedy. In a 1961 report, he wrote that “if the possessing classes of Latin America make the middle-class revolution impossible, they will make a ‘workers-and-peasants’ revolution inevitable” (Schlesinger, 10 March 1961). Therefore, the PDC represented the best choice to actualise such middle-class revolution.

Other than paying for more than half of Frei’s campaign, a wide-ranging disinformation campaign was set up. It included “extensive use [...] of the press, radio, films, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, direct mailings, paper streamers, and wall paintings” (Church Report 1975, p.

15). To scare the undecided masses of voters and distort their expectations of a potential Allende government, the most common images that were used were Soviet tanks and Cuban firing squads. Finally, as it had been already done in the past, black propaganda was employed. All sorts of written, visual and auditory media, purported to be originating from the Chilean Communist Party, were disseminated to spread lies and deceptions (Gustafson 2007). The results became soon visible. Three weeks before the election, Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent to President Johnson a top-secret message to inform him that “all polls favour Eduardo Frei over Salvador Allende (in Kornbluh 2016, p. 4). In the end, Frei overwhelmingly won against Allende (56.1% Vs. 38.9%), an outcome rarely seen in Chile’s typical three-way presidential races.

It is curious that at the same time the administration subverted the correct electoral democratic process, it promoted the respect for democratic principles through overt campaigns. As a matter of fact, the Alliance for Progress initiative had just started two years prior, attempting to create tighter links between the United States and Latin America. It consisted of a massive program of economic assistance to spur social progress (Taffet 2011). When Chileans elected Frei as hoped, Chile became the showcase for the Alliance. It is highly likely that the same worry at the end of Alessandri’s term still existed even after Frei won. If his policies failed to properly deliver social and economic development, votes would have turned to Allende in the next election. Between 1962 and 1970, Chile received \$1.2 billion in grants and loans in order to reduce the appeal of the socialist candidate (Taffet 2011). However, scholars agreed on the Alliance’s failure to deliver tangible results in the direction that the U.S. government wanted, in particular because of the victory of Allende in 1970 (Scheman 1988; Edwards 2009). It was definitely shelved in 1973 by the Organization of American States, but both Johnson and Nixon had started to gradually dismantle it long before (Scheman 1988).

After ensuring that Allende would lose the 1964 election, the CIA could have waited to restart their covert efforts in the period preceding the 1970 election in case Allende still ran for president. However, attention was focused on ensuring that the Communists and Socialists would not gain as many seats as possible in the congressional elections of 1965 and 1968. The Johnson administration authorised 12 more covert programs, which supposedly succeeded in preventing thirteen FRAP candidates from winning and in electing nineteen CIA-backed candidates (Qureshi 2009). Investigations placed the amount spent from the time Frei won the election to the months preceding the 1970 presidential election at about \$2 million (approximately \$11 million in 2023 dollars) (Kinzer 2006). All these efforts assisted in shaping the political development of Chilean society as the election of a certain party candidate meant the pursuit of different policy goals and the employment of different political strategies to reach them.

Furthermore, in the same period, the U.S. government dramatically increased military aid for a total of \$91 million (about half a billion dollars in 2023 dollars) between 1962 and 1970 (Petras and Morris 1975). It is clear that this assistance did not merely have a security nature, but ulterior economic and political motives, first of all closer ties with Chilean generals. This is the only possible explanation as during those years Chile did not face either internal or external threats. In light of all these aspects, by 1970 the United States had major stakes in preventing the accession of Allende to the presidency. The ten-year long covert effort created what U.S. Ambassador to Chile Korry called “fiduciary responsibility”, namely a sense of obligation by the U.S. to avert a communist-socialist government to the point of justifying an interference within the democratic electoral process (Church Report 1975, p. 118). Therefore, as the 1970 presidential election season approached, the United States could not back down in the event of another Allende campaign.

## ***2.4 The election of Salvador Allende as President of Chile***

Before looking at the specifics of the operation in Chile, it would be enriching to first examine the outlook towards Chile, and in general Latin America, that the two main foreign policymakers – Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger – had, to comprehend their later choices. Before his election as President of the United States, Richard Nixon had been Eisenhower’s vice-president. During a goodwill tour of South America, which did not include Chile as its leader was meeting the president in Washington, Nixon was met by angry mobs, which threw rocks and spat on him: “For a second it seemed as if it had begun to rain, and then I realised that the crowd on the observation deck just above our heads was showering us with spit” (Nixon 1978, p. 189). These misadventures were quickly publicly attributed to Soviet agents, who had easily deceived Latin American people into hating the U.S. (Lockhart 2019). It was convenient for the American administration to play on the Soviet scare rather than considering the realities of Latin American nationalism. As a result, Nixon began to see Latin Americans as primitive and not able to govern themselves with anything other than with violence and irrationality (Qureshi 2009).

When he finally reached the highest post in the land, his disdain for Latin America was shared by his closest ally, Dr. Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor. In June 1969, he had confronted Chile’s Foreign Minister, Gabriel Valdes, at a conference about the exploitative nature of U.S. assistance towards least developed nations in South America: “You come here speaking of Latin America, but this is not important. Nothing important can come from the South. History has never been produced in the South. The axis of history starts in Moscow, goes to Bonn, crosses over to Washington, and then goes to Tokyo” (in Hersh 1983, p. 263). It is thus evident to understand why the Nixon administration did not feel any moral restraints in justifying the overthrow of Allende.

In the early months of 1970, Kissinger advised President Nixon to replace the 303 Committee with a new group as its name had been disclosed publicly (Prados 2006). Accordingly, the *40 Committee* was established to manage and review covert action. However, because of Kissinger's highly personal style of leadership and due to the tight control he exercised over the mechanics of American foreign policymaking, the 40 Committee was sidelined to the point of meeting only one time in 1972 (Prados 2006). Kissinger had been chosen by Nixon not only because of his knowledge and interpretation of world affairs, as he was a professor at Harvard University, but also because of his talent for bureaucratic manoeuvres (Ambrose 1989). This development needs to be emphasized since, if secret pronouncements regarding delicate foreign policy issues were made by a single figure, reconstructing the details of covert operations becomes rather intricate.

Covert operations around the time of the 1970 presidential election differed from those in 1964 in one fundamental detail. While in 1964 the disinformation campaign against the FRAP coalition had been accompanied by explicit support to one candidate, Eduardo Frei Montalva, in 1970 the Nixon administration chose not to support a particular candidate. Declassified documents revealed that \$1 million (about \$6 million in 2023 dollars) was spent only on an anti-Allende campaign (Brands 2012). The Christian Democrats were divided as the candidate for the party, Radomiro Tomic, subscribed to policies more to the left than the ones supported by Frei (Kinzer 2006). Evidence of a relatively calmer electoral season is a telegram by U.S. Ambassador to Chile Korry on election day: "There were no surprises in the year-long campaign, no sudden 'events' that affected voters decisions" (Department of State, 5-22 September 1970). Indeed, the Nixon administration, but in particular Kissinger, had been seemingly persuaded that Alessandri, who was thought to be the favourite, would win: "Had I believed in the spring and summer of 1970 that there was a significant likelihood of an Allende



victory, I would have [...] considered a covert program of 1964 proportions, including the backing of a single candidate” (in Prados 1986, p. 317).

Nevertheless, it is difficult not to question Kissinger’s statements as the 40 Committee had reviewed its policy in the event of an Allende victory at least one time in 1970 (Kissinger, 24 July 1970). It is more likely that, although the new administration had its worries about the potential election of a Socialist president in Chile, more pressing foreign policy issues were at the top of Nixon’s agenda. For instance, the ‘Vietnamization’ of the Vietnam War, namely the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces and the concurrent training of South Vietnamese soldiers, took precedence over everything else (Gaddis 2005). At the time of Nixon’s inauguration, over half a million American soldiers were fighting a deeply unpopular conflict in Southeast Asia and 30’000 had died there since 1961. Furthermore, the conflict had crossed borders to Cambodia in the summer of 1970 so as to defeat the North Vietnam army stationed there and cut Communist supply routes (Gaddis 2005). The U.S. was also occupied with de-escalating tensions with both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, which until that point had not been recognised as the legitimate government of China (Gaddis 2005). Therefore, Washington’s attention could not be wasted to be concerned about, what the administration complacently perceived, an improbable Allende victory.

However, on September 4, 1970, the *Unidad Popular* (UP) (Popular Unity) alliance, successor to the FRAP coalition, won a relative majority of the votes (36.6%) against former president Alessandri’s conservative ticket (35.3%) and the Christian Democrat Tomic (28.1%). Although Allende’s victory was not a clean sweep, it still was enough to ensure him the presidency. In 1958, when Alessandri won, he had received an even lower percentage of votes: 31.6%. Therefore, it was not an exceptional fact that Allende did not win an outright majority and that it would be Congress electing him as president. The reason why the U.S. was surprised was that, before election day, the odds were against Allende. At one lunch with the Argentinian

ambassador to Chile, Ambassador Korry had predicted that Allende would only get around 33%, with Alessandri winning at 38% and Tomic third at 29% (in Haslam 2005, p. 50). He seemed confident in both Allende's unpopularity, strengthened by the U.S.-sponsored propaganda campaign.

Moreover, the selection of a single candidate to represent the UP alliance had not been painless. It took five months to agree on a common candidate among the six parties that made up the alliance (Faundez 1988). Consensus around Allende was not unified, in particular within the Communist Party. In the end, Luis Corvalán, General Secretary of the party, accepted Allende as their candidate, not without first clarifying why he had not been fully convinced: "He repeated himself in his speeches, slipped into clichés and well-worn phrases. He showed signs of stagnation. The people's movement had developed further than he had" (Corvalán 1997, p. 117). Acknowledging this internal criticism is crucial to understand the domestic reasons why Allende failed in 1973. As a matter of fact, some academics, for instance Qureshi (2009), tended to overlook the cracks within the UP alliance and overemphasise the disunity within other parties. However, it is only by recognising Allende's own difficulties to keep the left-wing coalition together that one can see why the election of Allende could not be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, Allende and the UP won the election despite internal and external obstacles. In his victory speech, Allende proclaimed that:

We shall abolish the monopolies [...] We shall abolish the large estates [...] We shall put an end to the foreign ownership of our industry [...] I won't be just another president. I will be the first president of the first really democratic, popular, national and revolutionary government in the history of Chile (in Lawson 2017, p. 145)

Now elected by the Chilean people, he just needed the confirmation by the Chilean Congress to begin the implementation of his peaceful way to socialism. The language chosen by the newly elected president mirrored the same declarations that statesmen, such as Mossadegh, Arbenz and Castro, uttered before becoming a target of the clandestine arm of the United States government. It was not unexpected then that Nixon and his closest collaborators rapidly moved to undermine Allende's grasp onto power.

## **2.5     *'1 in 10 chance perhaps, but save Chile'***

The current academic consensus (Gustafson 2007; Haslam 2005; Qureshi 2009; Weiner 2008) traced the start of covert action against the incumbent president to a National Security Council (NSC) meeting held on September 15. However, from an attentive analysis of recently declassified documents, the Nixon administration had started looking into options in case of a UP victory at least two months before election day. There is a fundamental difference between policies to avoid the instalment of a socialist government in Latin America, as it had been done during the 1964 election, and the outright formulation of strategy for dealing with an elected socialist government even before its election.

NSC Study Memorandum 97, dated 24 July 1970 and signed by Kissinger, urged the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to first understand if an Allende government would have been detrimental to U.S. interests in the region and, if so, what options would be available to counter such threat. The two responses by the Department of State both ended with discussing the potential use of an extreme measure: sponsoring a coup. The first answer was transmitted by Ambassador Korry on August 11, almost a month before election day, warning the Department of State that "if Allende is inaugurated by constitutional process, [...] it is highly unlikely that the conditions or

motivations for a military overthrow of Allende will prevail” (Department of State, 11 August 1970). The inauguration was fixed for November 3, two months after the election.

In the message, Korry also mentioned the main reason why the army would not have acted if Congress chose Allende as the rightful president: the Schneider Doctrine. At the time, the Commander-in-chief of the Chilean Army was General René Schneider. He firmly believed that the armed forces had an apolitical role, which compelled them to respect the choice of Congress and refute the idea that military power could be a valid alternative to political power (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1976). The issue at stake for a potential intervention of the army was not whether there were officers hostile to an Allende presidency, which there were and not a few (Department of State, 11 August 1970). Without cohesive leadership, a Chilean-led coup would have failed and Allende would have become president regardless. The second memorandum by the Department of State was developed in Washington by an ad hoc group led by Charles A. Meyer, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Compared to Korry’s conclusions, it added that “U.S. support would be no more than a marginal factor in the calculation of the Chilean military” (Department of State, 18 August 1970). In other words, the Chilean army already needed to be willing to act for American efforts to have any chance of success. However, it was clear how, until Schneider remained in his post, the probability of a coup was minimal.

Covert action planning surely picked up after September 10 when the French ambassador to Chile reported that the Communist Party requested 2/3 of the available administrative posts, that is 800 out of 1200 (in Kornbluh 2016). It would have placed the government on a more Marxist trajectory without making it too obvious, since the ministers would be chosen from the other parties of the alliance. Nonetheless, the September 15 meeting represented a critical expansion of the efforts to overturn Allende. As recorded, present were, other than Nixon himself, Kissinger, CIA Director Richard Helms (1966-73) and Attorney

General John Mitchell (1969-72). Richard Helms had already been the Director of Central Intelligence for four years as he had been appointed in 1966, under President Johnson. Unfortunately, a transcript of the meeting was not preserved, or has not been declassified yet. Despite this, Helms' declassified notes revealed key conclusions reached by the end:

- 1 in 10 chance perhaps, but save Chile!
- Worth spending
- Not concerned risks involved
- No involvement of embassy
- \$10,000,000 available, more if necessary
- Full-time job – best men we have
- Game plan
- Make the economy scream
- 48 hours plan of action

There are a few comments to make to grasp what this meeting really meant. First, this outline is the first documentary evidence of an American president personally ordering the overthrow of a democratically elected government (Westad 2007). Second, the urgency of such operation was dictated by the existence of an unmodifiable deadline: 24 October 1970, the day Congress would meet to confirm Allende as president of Chile. Third, although the odds were against the U.S., Nixon was not concerned of either the operation failing or the American hidden hand being discovered. From these simple notes, it is unquestionable Nixon's dread of losing a second nation in the Western Hemisphere to Marxism.

Having received direct orders from the President, Helms held a meeting the day after with several high-ranking CIA officials. On the declassified memorandum about the meeting, the first mention of 'Project FUBELT' was recorded, whose purpose was "to prevent Allende from coming to power or to unseat him" (CIA, 16 September 1970). Moreover, it reported

Helms' appointment of Thomas Karamessines, the then Deputy Director for Plans (1967-73), thus responsible for covert operations, as the chief supervisor of a new "special task force" (CIA, 16 September 1970). Over the next few days, the political Track I solution and the military Track II solution were arranged. The former would involve dissuading Chilean congressmen to vote for Allende on October 24 and instead choosing Alessandri, while the latter would involve inducing a military coup by eliminating General Schneider, who as already seen was the main obstacle for a coup to come about.

Since early preparations started before the September 15 meeting, the diplomatic and intelligence communities were well aware that both plans had very limited chances of success unless the prospect of an Allende presidency triggered "national chaos and widespread violence", which would have hardly occurred (Department of State, 12 September 1970). Almost a week before the September 15 meeting, William Broe, the CIA's head of the Western Hemisphere Division, told Henry Hecksher, the CIA Chief of Station in Santiago, Chile, that "the political/constitutional route in any form is a non-starter", thus revealing extremely low faith in the success of Track I even before its official start (CIA, 9 September 1970). Hecksher was also ordered to establish as many contacts as he could with influential Chilean military officers to stimulate a coup, something that he described as "the most difficult series of manoeuvres" (CIA, 9 September 1970).

What is interesting to emphasise at this stage of the operation is the failure to halt the process of implementation of Track I and Track II notwithstanding all the conflicting evidence coming from a variety of respectable sources. A CIA analyst in the Directorate of Plans argued that applying Cold War conventional wisdom to Chile depicted a grossly inaccurate picture of the country: "Allende will be hard for the Communist party and for Moscow to control" and "we will be repeating the errors we made in 1959 and 1960 when we drove Fidel Castro in the Soviet camp [...] we would bring upon ourselves a much more dangerous civil war in Chile"

(in Kornbluh 2016, p. 10). Even Kissinger's top assistant on Latin America, Viron Vaky, presented him with a definite comment on covert action against Allende on September 14: "*Military action is impossible*, we have no capability to motivate or instigate a coup [...] what we propose is patently a violation of our own principles [...] we normally depart from them only to meet the gravest threat [...] is Allende a mortal threat to the U.S.? It is hard to argue this" (Vaky, 14 September 1970). It is remarkable that Tracks I and II carried on undismayed.

### *2.5.1 What did Track I encompass?*

Since the UP ticket did not gain an absolute majority, it would be Congress confirming Allende as the new president. The U.S. needed to bribe enough congressmen, especially Christian Democrats, for the runner-up Alessandri to be elected and not Allende. Then, Alessandri would relinquish his position and call new elections. At this point, former president Frei would be able to run again and presumably beat Allende in a two-way election. Therefore, the central issue here was to convince both Congress and Frei to lead the covert effort.

Ambassador Korry took the reins over this course of action with \$250'000 (almost \$1.5 million in 2023 dollars) at his disposal (Church Report 1975, p. 31). Scholars have reflected on the Ambassador's lack of understanding of the respect that elected officials in Chile had for the constitutional process (Kinzer 2006; Gustafson 2007; Prados 2006). While the American diplomat saw the offering of money as an incentive, Chilean politicians perceived as both a disrespect to their sacred democratic role and a blatant interference by a foreign government in their domestic endeavours. Finally, by late September, the embassy determined that it would have never been able to divert enough Congressional votes to ratify Alessandri and hence changed the course of Track I. CIA cables revealed that central to its accomplishment became Frei alone (CIA, 27 September 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 50-6). Korry was required to encourage Frei to 1) dismiss his cabinet; 2) form a military cabinet; 3) appoint an acting

president and resign. In other words, Track I transformed into the sponsoring of a military coup by lawful means presumably in order to avoid chaos and violence.

This plan started with an obvious limitation: Frei's fervour about Chile's democratic system. The only way that Frei might have been enticed to set the plan in motion was to influence his frame of mind, forcing him to believe that tarnishing the democratic rule of law was the only way to defend the nation from a communist takeover. Indeed, a covert campaign was organised to convince him that Allende would have utterly destroyed this democratic tradition. Newspapers became flooded with false articles leaking plans by the Communist Party to denigrate Frei's political and private life after Allende's inauguration (CIA, 21 September 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 13). Meanwhile, Frei's wife started receiving tens of fabricated letters by Latin American women imploring her and her husband to save Chile and the entire region from Marxism (CIA, 9 October 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 13).

### *2.5.2 What did Track II encompass?*

As one might have noticed, the historical difference between Tracks I and II is not accurate. Both tracks quickly developed into military coup projects. While the first one included Ambassador Korry in a nonviolent effort, the latter concentrated on identifying a military figure who could have personally led a violent putsch. In complete disdain for good practices between countries, it is clear why Track II was unknown to most; only Kissinger and a restricted group of CIA officials mapped out its execution (Weiner 2008). The executive showed readiness in supporting a violent takeover by creating the right climate through propaganda and disinformation campaigns, but excluding the idea of sending American soldiers on the ground. In the words that the Santiago Station received from the CIA's headquarters at Langley, Virginia: "It is our task to create such a climate [...] that will force the military and the president to take some action in the desired direction" (CIA, 27 September 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p.



50). Economic warfare measures were drawn to destabilise the country and induce mass tensions. Helms informed Kissinger that “a suddenly disastrous economic situation would be the most logical pretext for a military move” (Helms, 7 October 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 17). In spite of suitable solutions, the extremely limited time available – three weeks to the Congressional vote – did not play in the United States’ favour. As a matter of fact, several scholarly articles reported no considerable economic alterations in October of 1970 (Haslam 2005; Sigmund 1977; Sigmund 1993).

The search for the right man also became more complicated than expected. Among active-duty officers, the constant presence of General Schneider, who supported a constitutional transfer of power, failed to produce meaningful results. Even though multiple contacts were established, they were eventually forgotten as they waited for Frei to form a new military cabinet, but Frei was waiting for the generals to first depose Schneider (Lockhart 2019). They were in a deadlock situation. In early October, the sole name that remained was that of retired General Roberto Viaux, who had already failed at arranging a takeover against Frei in 1969 and did not command any troops. At this point, the lack of results understandably upset the American leadership. At a 40 Committee meeting Kissinger berated efforts underway as “there were only eighteen days left” and “some drastic action was called for to shock the Chileans into action” (National Security Council, 6 October 1970). A gradual scheme to crumble Chile’s economy would not be adequate anymore for the purpose of overthrowing Allende before the Congressional vote.

The only plan that might have worked was making General Schneider disappear so as to encourage the armed forces to move against Allende. Covert agents, together with Viaux’s men, agreed on a plan that would have killed multiple birds with one stone. With Schneider gone, a general sympathetic to the coup would be appointed and the kidnapping plot would be blamed on communist extremists (Downes and Lilley 2010). This would undermine Allende’s

popularity and create the conditions for a coup. Nevertheless, those within the CIA responsible for coup plotting continued to be unsure about the abilities of Viaux to effectively kidnap Schneider and initiate a putsch, clearly perceptible in this summary report written after Allende's inauguration: "It became evident that Viaux did not have the organization or support to carry out a successful coup, but might trigger prematurely an action that would spoil the better chances of doing so" (CIA, 18 November 1970). What is striking is the sway that Nixon and Kissinger held over the CIA, even when several factors – lack of time and resources – were against such operation. In a secret mid-October meeting with Kissinger, as Deputy Director for Plans Karamessines testified in 1975, "the president went out of his way to impress all of those there with his conviction that it was absolutely essential that the election of Mr. Allende to the presidency be thwarted" (in Kinzer 2006, p. 182). Therefore, the operation continued.

Five days before the scheduled Congressional vote, it seemed that the CIA was able to generate modest positive results: "Apparently a number of senior military leaders have joined together and have agreed to move against the government" (CIA, 19 October 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 27). However, two kidnapping attempts failed. On October 19, Schneider was to be kidnapped after a party by ambushing his official car, but instead left in his personal car (Lockhart 2019). On October 20, he was to be intercepted during rush hour, but the abductors got stuck in traffic (Lockhart 2019). The manners in which these endeavours were executed portray an inexperienced abduction team and a general carelessness for keeping the mission secret. Probably in the hopes of a more direct approach, by October 22, covert CIA agents in Chile had provided a group of conspirators with grenades, machine guns, ammunition and \$50'000 dollars (about \$400'000 in 2023 dollars) (CIA, 18 October 1970). In the early morning of October 22, Schneider's car was struck by a jeep and he was shot at close range, dying three days later. Although not part of the plan, the CIA was still convinced that Schneider's death would prevent Allende from being confirmed by Congress: "A coup climate now prevails in

Chile” (CIA, 23 October 1970). Again, this naïve claim likely generated from a dubious understanding of the strength of the civil and constitutional tradition in Chile. Wanting to believe in its omnipotent power to change events at its pleasure, the CIA had often offered American administration self-serving predictions in order to place more resources into foreseeably messy operations (Valentine 2016). As confirmation of this problematic perspective, the assassination of Schneider produced a wave of support for the new president, with Congress ratifying Allende’s victory by an overwhelming majority. Ten days later, Allende was publicly inaugurated as the new President of Chile.

When details of the plot became public years later, Kissinger felt the need to wash his hands of the botched operation by declaring that he called off Track II during a meeting on October 15 (Kissinger 1999). The reality of his statement is partial as the memorandum of the conversation also included his instructions to “continue keeping the pressure on every Allende weak spot in sight – now, after the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, after 5 November, and into the future” (CIA, 15 October 1970). Instead of totally terminating Track II, Kissinger ordered its transformation into an all-encompassing spoiling operation to continue until the successful overthrow of Allende.

## ***2.6 After the inauguration (November 3, 1970)***

Failing to prevent his inauguration, the Nixon administration did not desist from bringing about Allende’s downfall. “We want to do it right and bring him down”, U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers proclaimed at a NSC meeting three days after the inauguration (National Security Council, 6 November 1970). What was the explanation for such bellicosity? In Kissinger’s words, “what happens in Chile [will impact] what happens in the rest of Latin America and the developing world [...] and on the larger world picture, including [...] relations with the USSR” (Kissinger, 5 November 1970). The impression was that, if Allende was

allowed by the United States to consolidate his socialist regime, other nations would have tried to do the same after seeing the absence of a negative American response. The existence of a model, of a blueprint to follow was perceived as a threat to the primacy of the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere, such as in Italy (Davis 1985). Rather than a short-term covert operation, the government authorised a long-term overt and covert effort to destabilise Chile organised around three pillars: diplomatic isolation, economic strangulation and covert action.

Between 1970 and 1973, the CIA pursued two objectives through clandestine intervention: shift Chileans' voting patterns to the right and encourage opposition to Allende. At the same time, covert agents needed to maintain and enlarge their contacts within the Chilean military to gain insider information on potential coup plots. To this effect, more than \$6 million (around \$40 million in 2023 dollars) were spent. According to Kornbluh (2016, p. 88-9), the propaganda campaign cost \$2 million, while \$3.5 million were directly funnelled into opposition political parties. Finally, \$1.5 million were given to civil society organisations (labour, business and paramilitary) to promote strikes, protests and demonstrations against the government.

### *2.6.1 Social and political unrest: El Mercurio*

Political operations concentrated on providing funds to the centrist faction of the Christian Democratic Party, which was being weakened by its left wing, headed by former Foreign Minister Gabriel Valdes. This latter believed that cooperation with Allende was possible and should be pursued, making him a concern for the American administration (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1976). Instead, the Frei faction had the potential to be “the best [...] source of organized opposition to the consolidation of the Allende Government” (Kissinger's office, 12 November 1970, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 89). Therefore, more than \$1.2 million (about \$8.5

million in 2023 dollars) proved useful to finance the campaigns of centrist PDC for the municipal elections of April 1971. This disbursement would not be the last, as at least eight other payments, with the last being in August 1973, were approved by the 40 Committee to finance opposition campaigns in anticipation of the March 1973 congressional election (Weiner 2008). However, at least at the beginning, Allende enjoyed great popular support, which augmented during the first year of his term. In April 1971, the five parties of the Popular Unity alliance were chosen by close to 50% of the votes, an increase of almost 14% from the September 1970 election.

CIA covert action aided in achieving a more positive outcome in the March 1973 election as the opposition parties won an absolute majority both in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. However, the number of congressmen was still short of the amount needed to start an impeachment procedure against the president for constitutional violations (Devine 2014). What changed in these two years? The most significant role was played by the CIA-backed *El Mercurio*, Chile's largest newspaper. From Allende's inauguration to his overthrow, the newspaper published "attacks against Allende attempts to nationalize banks, violation of press freedom, and land seizures" (CIA, early 1971, in Kornbluh 2016, p. 92). The idea behind funding *El Mercurio* and not arranging an American-led propaganda campaign was the need to keep the situation a Chilean matter. Moreover, if Allende had tried to shut down the newspaper, the United States would have had the opportunity to criticise his freedom of the press record not only bilaterally, but also in international fora, such as in the Organization of American States (Gustafson 2007).

In September 1971, Nixon himself authorised \$700'000 in covert funds to the Chilean newspaper. It highlighted the weight that *El Mercurio* had in the American administration's minds; if direct measures did not work, perhaps a Chilean approach would have better results. Indeed, already by early 1972, the newspaper had become "a thorn in Allende's side" as noted

by one of Kissinger's aides (National Security Council, 10 April 1972). It is in this period that the newspaper stopped being a simple intermediary between news sources and the public, and transformed into the national spokesperson for organised agitation against the Allende government. By 1973, Allende regarded El Mercurio on the same level as the Frente Nacionalista Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Liberty Nationalist Front), a fascist and paramilitary group responsible for terrorist attacks across the country (Knott 1996). It is likely that he implied that both were able to create conflict and confrontation towards his government. The final contribution of El Mercurio to the creation of a favourable coup climate was the smear campaign that it conducted against Commander-in-Chief General Carlos Prats, Schneider's successor. As his predecessor, Prats was dedicated to the maintenance of the neutrality of the armed forces and for this reason controlled that his officers would not interfere with the political process (Westad 2017). Prats resigned on August 22 and was replaced by a general favourable to a military coup, Augusto Pinochet.

### *2.6.2 Allende's aggressive policies: A self-inflicted wound*

When analysing foreign interference over relatively long periods of time, it is necessary to also consider domestic developments as they represent the contextual background around which covert action takes place. For instance, if Allende had taken over a flourishing Chile, willing to implement progressive reforms, the United States would have had much more difficulty than it already had, including having to spend higher sums of money, to succeed in ousting Allende. However, this was not the state of the country at the time Allende took office.

Allende inherited a country with strong civic institutions in which bargaining and compromise with the opposition parties were necessary to achieve policy goals (Goldberg 1975). Furthermore, the armed forces were mostly concerned about maintaining their autonomy, and thus stayed out of policy debates (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1976). On the

other hand, the state of the Chilean economy was abysmal. Economic growth was less than 1% throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with an average rate of inflation of 30%. Foreseeably, private investors' reluctance to invest forced the state to fund almost 60% of the total annual investment (Goldberg 1975). Moreover, increases in government spending for salaries, pensions and other welfare benefits put a further strain on the state's ability to reform the system (Goldberg 1975). Former presidents had tried to satisfy their citizens' demands not mindful of the economy's capacity to finance them.

When Allende took power, two major shifts happened within Chile's civic institutions. First, the bargaining process between the UP alliance and the opposition parties, in particular the Christian Democrats and the conservative Partido Nacional (National Party), became ineffectual (Sigmund 1977). The opposition weaponised their majority in Congress impeaching and removing from office seven cabinet ministers and the governors of two provinces (Petras and Morris 1975). Since political conflicts could not be resolved within Congress, they had to be referred to third parties, which led to the second change. The military acquired a new role as a conflict-resolving force, hence becoming involved in issues of substantive policy (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1976).

As for Allende, he remained confident in his ability to implement his progressive reforms through executive orders. This increased the semblance of illegitimacy in the view of opposition parties (Brands 2012). However, at the beginning of his term, this confidence brought good results with lower levels of unemployment and a stimulated economy due to higher state spending. This success translated into more favourable voting patterns. As mentioned above, in the April 1971 election, the UP alliance got almost 50% of the votes, an increase of more than 13% compared to the September presidential election. It represented a clear sign to Allende, who accelerated his progressive reform plan:

- Public ownership was extended by nationalising the American copper companies, which did not receive almost any compensation, and the banking system.
- Land properties exceeding 80 hectares of land were expropriated to create collectives for the lowest-paid members of society.
- The private sector was heavily curtailed through the acquisition of about 300 factories by the government.

Effectively, Allende revolutionised Chile's economy in less than two years. Moreover, his commitment to sustain poorer citizens diverted the government's attention away from keeping inflation levels at a manageable level (Goldberg 1975). Spending more than exports' revenues could bring in led to increased deficit spending and hyperinflation. By early 1973, Chile's stable civic institutions were blocked in a struggle for power. This is where the reader should look for an answer as to why the armed forces felt the necessity to intervene and bring down the government. On one side, the Allende government was shifting the political and economic foundations of Chile more and more to the left. On the other, the opposition parties, unable to impeach the president, but still wanting to oust him, seemed ready to sacrifice the country's democratic institutions. This collective resistance to socialist change, which by the summer of 1973 was also held by small and big businessmen, factory workers and peasants, could have plunged the country into civil war (Lemoyne 1974).

Knowing about domestic and foreign developments, the military's intervention was not a total surprise. The conclusion of Allende's government represented "the outcome of a three-year experiment testing whether political institutions can survive sharp transformations in their policies" (Goldberg 1975, p. 93). Goldberg's arguments are still valid since the article was released before any real investigation on American covert efforts in Chile took place and thus cannot be criticised as, for example, trying to take the blame off the Nixon administration. The



public response to Allende's experiment was negative, unfolding a sequence of events that led to his overthrow and death.

## ***2.7 The role of the CIA in the September 11, 1973, coup***

At this point, it is clear that the conditions for a coup were not completely artificially created, but were exacerbated by CIA agents, who worked their magic on an already highly polarised society and crumbling economy. However, as of 2023 knowledge, it is still not possible to be totally sure that the United States had nothing to do with the orchestration and execution of the coup that left Allende dead and a military government in power in Chile. On one hand, it has become a traditionally accepted belief that, owing to its constant meddling in the affairs of other nations, the U.S. government's hidden hand must have had something to do with the coup that brought General Pinochet to power (Valentine 2016). On the other, there are insiders that tended to remove the U.S. from the coup equation, making it an entire Chilean issue. A clandestine CIA officer, Jack Devine, stationed in Chile in 1973, recounted in a *Foreign Affairs* article (2014) the atmosphere that had developed in Santiago in the summer months of 1973. Talks of overthrowing Allende had increased since a plot failed in June, strikes and protests enveloped the city's streets as the successor of General Schneider, General Carlos Prats, also devout to the principle of non-intervention of the armed forces, resigned in August.

What is certain is that the United States government had prior knowledge of the coup, although there is some discrepancy around how much prior notice the American government had. By means of confidential revelations, Kornbluh (2016) argued that they knew it would occur at least 3 days before. More conservative accounts say one day (Devine 2014). This latter version of the story is supported by a declassified cable sent to Langley and then distributed to top officials in Washington detailing how the coup would have developed (CIA, 10 September 1973). It is reasonable to argue that both accounts are more similar to each other than it seems

since in Devine's cable he communicated that the coup had to be postponed from September 10 to September 11 to improve tactical coordination between the three branches of the Chilean armed forces: the Ejército (Army), the Armada (Navy) and the Fuerza Aérea (Air Force). Nevertheless, what needs to be made clear is that, despite prior knowledge of the coup, no warning was sent to Allende. Therefore, to some extent the United States had somewhat of a direct role in Allende's final overthrow and death.

Official U.S. government documents all cover the coup in a superficial manner. One report, which reviewed CIA records in accordance with new requirements for reporting clandestine operations to Congress, concluded that the Nixon administration refused to offer any type of assistance to the Chilean military in the days before the coup (Hinchey Report 2000). Indeed, there is a lack of declassified sources on the matter and the few that have been released to the public are either devoid of important information or heavily redacted. For instance, the pages on Chile in the President's Daily Briefs of September 8 and September 11 remain totally censored. These documents were of crucial importance because they were drafted by the CIA and other American intelligence agencies, thus containing precise information on the most critical foreign policy developments of the day (Haslam 2005). This could mean two things: whatever role was played needs to remain secret or that the U.S. did not actually participate in organising the coup.

Reports also tended to make explicit the fact that Allende took his own life and was not killed by the armed forces during the struggle within the Presidential Palace (Devine 2014; Garcia 1974). This seemingly trivial technicality was seen as consequential to avoid the creation of a movement supporting the figure of Allende as a martyr, as a man that give up a role that was given to him by the Constitution (Qureshi 2009). Other sources instead tried to portray the armed forces as benevolent, attempting to convince Allende to resign and leave the country instead of wasting his life and that of those soldiers faithful to him (Garcia 1974;

Valenzuela 1978). From the perspective of the American government, however, these developments were probably seen as trifling. What mattered was one thing: the socialist government of Salvador Allende had come to an abrupt end.

## **2.8 *The Church Committee***

After having dealt with the details of CIA covert operations in Chile, a paragraph should be dedicated to explaining how the public, and consequently the academic community, gained access to all kinds of classified documents about covert action in Chile in the period before and after the election of Allende as president of Chile in 1970. Most academic works on the CIA operations in Chile are based on extensive investigations conducted in 1975-6 by a special committee of the U.S. Senate: the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities, chaired by Senator Frank Church (D-ID). The final report was compiled after “holding 126 full committee meetings, 40 subcommittee hearings, interviewing some 800 witnesses in public and closed sessions, and combing through 110,000 documents” in order to examine the 900 major covert operations and several thousand minor ones that had been authorised since the end of the Second World War (United States Senate 2023). What was the significance of such investigation? Indeed, it created a scandal with political consequences. President Ford tried to minimise the backlash by issuing Executive Order 11905, which banned successive administrations from authorising political assassinations (Prados 2006). One has to remember that Ford was running for election in 1976 and thus needed to show himself as the right candidate for the presidency.

However, the core conclusion derived from these investigations is something more insightful. It made possible a general understanding of the failure for the United States to carry out covert operations within a constitutional framework. Covert operations had been used in an excessive way, with counterproductive results not a few times. In 30 years, the U.S.

government had neglected to find a proper balance between the need for secrecy in intelligence operations and the maintenance of American democracy. The basis for all this, as Church wrote, was to be ascribed “to the fantasy that it lay within our power to control other countries through the covert manipulation of their affairs [...] a greater illusion that entrapped and enthralled our Presidents – the illusion of American omnipotence” (in Prados 1986, p. 337).

In addition to the Senate Committee, the House of Representatives also created their own committee, chaired by Representative Otis G. Pike (D-NY), which conducted a separate investigation process. The Ford administration was able to block the publication of the entire final report, which would have probably revealed more details of the until then unchecked power of the executive branch (Jacobsen 2019). The few information later leaked to the American public heavily implicated the President’s office for the authorisation of all types of covert operations, from propaganda to political action to attempted assassinations to paramilitary initiatives (Jacobsen 2019). It represented a crucial specification as the Church report instead identified the CIA as the architect of those missions. This difference could represent a compromise between allowing the publication of the Church Report and granting plausible deniability to the administration in office. Indeed, the Church Committee’s report solely blamed the Agency, described by the same Church as “a rogue elephant”, hence absolving the executives that had controlled such elephant (in Weiner 2008, p. 406).

The decision not to classify the report undoubtedly involved great risks. Proof of this is the fact that President Ford and his administration tried in vain to prevent its publication (Prados 2006). It grandly revealed the duplicitous stance of the United States government regarding overt commitments in foreign policy about self-determination and national sovereignty and covert attempts to oust democratically elected leaders and carelessly endanger democratic systems of government. As evident from previous subchapters, public American

hostility towards Allende and his policies was never properly concealed, but the Church Report clearly put in writing a large share of the disreputable activities effected in Chile and elsewhere.

By using the revelations concerning the Chilean case, some scholars have even attempted to discredit Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) principles. DPT studies argue that democracies almost never engage in aggressive behaviours against other democracies. The point at issue is whether covert acts apply to such principles. Scholars answering in the negative to this question are those, like Forsythe (1992) and Russett (1993), that remarked on the still not fully mature status of Chile's democracy and on the fact that covert war can never amount to a full-blown, full-scale overt war. A covert operation, even one as lengthy and multifarious as the one mounted against Allende, is not able to generate as great numbers of casualties as overt offensives. However, Kim (2005) more recently maintained that the U.S. covert war on Chile was so extensive and impactful that the distinction between covert and overt engagements at this level is purely academic. Is it natural that overt and covert acts have different characteristics since, if they employed the same tactics and achieved the same results, there would be no need for technical distinctions.

Kim's conclusions are more convincing as DPT is based on the underlying tenet that in the case democracies act, they do so to advance democratic principles and values. In the Chilean case, the American elites justified the operation against Allende as necessary action to avoid the establishment of a communist Chile, thus implying their desire to protect the democratic tradition of the country (Haslam 2005). In reality, the covert acts were meant to disrupt the democratic electoral process and amplify existing tensions among segments of Chile's population, which provoked the armed forces to establish a military regime (Kim 2005). Only in 1990, 17 years after the coup that left Allende dead, a transition to democracy, involving both the regime and civil society, commenced.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

This chapter ascertained the role that the United States played as regards with Chile's domestic politics during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. It challenged present academic theories attributing Allende's downfall either to domestic forces or to America's covert plots. CIA's clandestine acts perpetrated a climate of instability within the South American country that was to be mostly blamed on the precarious economic conditions of the country and the broad, counterproductive reforms implemented by the Allende government. Encouraged by secret financing and accusing the government of dismantling the democratic foundations of the state, opposition parties blocked the policymaking process. Furthermore, the provision of secret funds to Chile's biggest newspaper, *El Mercurio*, swayed public opinion, in particular among the military, to adopt an aggressive stance towards the Allende government. Finally, the chapter cast doubt on the direct role that the American government might have played in the coup of September 1973, simply arguing that the only certain thing was the Nixon administration's prior knowledge of coup plotting against Allende.

### 3. AFGHANISTAN

*“We’ll never know if Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo had not made the decision to intervene in Afghanistan whether the Soviet Union would still be in existence today”*  
Afghan expert David Isby (in Cogan 1993, p. 73)

This chapter examines another covert operation that at its conclusion led to regime change: Operation Cyclone, the thirteen-year-long secret financing of the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. However, its conclusion did not merely mark the beginning of a new government – the Islamic State of Afghanistan, but it represented a pivotal moment within the larger Cold War. With the withdrawal of the Soviet army in February 1989, the last of the proxy wars between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union came to an end. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, in the words of U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Theodore Eliot Jr. (1973-8), “the rapid collapse of a five-hundred-year-old system [and of] the last great European empire” occurred (in Arnold 1993, p. viii). Therefore, it is highly relevant analysing the Afghanistan episode to understand its complexities as probably the most expensive and extensive covert operation ever.

Through an in-depth analysis of this case study, it will also be possible to distinguish the different features of this operation from the clandestine efforts against Allende. In this latter the U.S. national security state went against a small state in the Western Hemisphere with no close links with the Soviet Union, trying to first avoid the democratic election of a socialist president and then trigger his overthrow. On the other hand, as it will become clear, in Afghanistan, the United States poured billions of dollars by shipping weapons to Afghan rebels in their nationalist struggle against a foreign power in order to bleed dry the Soviet Union’s economy by forcing them to invest all their money in supporting their invasion of the Central Asian country.

### ***3.1 Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion***

Before exploring the situation that unfolded after the Soviet invasion at the end of 1979, it is necessary to better comprehend the context that made the CIA operation an unfortunate possibility. Long before the revolution that brought to power the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in April 1978, the Soviet Union had a stable relationship with Afghanistan. The first nation to officially recognise Afghanistan as an independent state, the USSR developed tight political, military and economic links to the point of becoming Afghanistan's top trading partner (Prados 2002). It is important to specify that this was not done against Washington's wishes. As a matter of fact, since the country gained independence in 1919, it had tried unsuccessfully to establish close ties with the North American country. Administration after administration refused to both recognise Afghanistan as an independent country until 1934 and open a resident diplomatic mission in Kabul until 1942 (Adamec 1974). Moreover, in 1953, in an attempt to create an ideological southern wall to contain the USSR, the incoming Secretary of State John Foster Dulles signed military pacts with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, but did not contact Afghanistan's leadership (Adamec 1974).

Scholars have attempted to clarify the reasons why this happened. There are those, such as Barfield (2010), that explained this indifference by pointing out Afghanistan's remoteness and the narrow vision of U.S. political leaders, both of which impeded a proper understanding of the strategic importance of Afghanistan. On the other hand, academics, like Poullada (1981), concentrated on the Eurocentric vision of American diplomats in the post-war period to justify their inability to manage and manoeuvre political issues in regions seen as tangential to American interests. Finally, an interesting point of view was offered by Tanner (2002), who, taking into account Cold War logic, argued that the U.S. did not spread its influence in Afghanistan for fear of an aggressive Soviet reaction due to its close proximity to the Soviet Union's southern borders and in the hope that if it stayed away, the Soviets would have done



the same. This last argument seems flawed as the United States did not consider this fear in other 'sensitive' areas, such as Iran and Turkey, where it intervened regardless of their contiguity with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the result remained the same in the sense that the United States lost the chance to tie Afghanistan to the West to prevent future Soviet penetration; the same Soviet penetration that in the end the U.S. was forced to address in 1979.

The U.S.-Afghanistan relationship became even more complicated in the 1950s and 1960s as, due to America's refusal to approve arms sales, Prime Minister Daoud Khan (1953-63) opened negotiations with the Soviet Union, which had been offering military aid for a long time. Washington cautioned him about the move, telling him that it would eventually lead to ever-increasing Soviet penetration (Poullada 1981). But how could he listen to a country that had repeatedly refused to collaborate with his government? The U.S. had limited diplomatic leverage in the state after decades of indifference, which transformed into open hostility after a few unpleasant incidents culminating after Vice President Nixon's visit to Kabul in April 1953. The central problem was that American diplomats and politicians failed to understand the nationalist importance of the Pashtunistan issue, entirely dismissing the Afghan case.

A majority of the Afghan population, Pashtuns had ruled Afghan society for two hundred years until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British Crown, through the Durand Line, partitioned the Pashtun tribes between Afghanistan and British India. When this latter's northern portion became independent in 1947 with the name of Pakistan following the dissolution of the British Raj, Afghanistan emerged as the only country not to support Pakistan's entry into the United Nations as that meant abandoning their brothers on the other side of the border (Poullada 1981). However, if the U.S. would have been able to assert their benevolent neutrality and at least listen to the Afghan case without a need to side with either party, it is likely that Afghanistan would have not made its way into the Soviet sphere of influence. Instead, successive American administrations refused to sign military deals if the

Pashtun issue was not dropped in its entirety and, when Nixon came to Kabul in 1953, he lectured Prime Minister Daoud, who was a fervent Pashtun nationalist, on why the Pashtunistan issue was nonsensical and how Pakistan's position was the one the Eisenhower administration supported, meaning that the Durand Line was the international boundary between the two states (Barfield 2010).

The Soviet Union's penetration into the Afghan state became deeper in 1955-6 when Afghanistan and Pakistan were on the verge of war following a mob attack on the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul. The USSR quickly intervened offering more military aid, political support and most importantly assumed a supportive position regarding the Pashtunistan issue (Tanner 2002). This offer seemed to hide geopolitical desires by the Soviet Union to create a corridor from its southern borders to the Indian Ocean, which became a possibility by exploiting Afghan resentment towards America and by supporting Afghan aspirations and interests. As a matter of fact, the Soviet Union saw as its "manifest destiny" taking the place of the retreating British Empire in the region (Poullada 1981, p. 190). This manifest destiny was not of recent formation. Indeed, although not relevant for this thesis, it is interesting to observe that, between the mid and late 1800s, the British and Russian Empires clashed both militarily and diplomatically to enlarge their spheres of influence in Central and South Asia, a rivalry that was dubbed the 'Great Game' (Fromkin 1979). Although this struggle never escalated into full-scale war, it redefined the entire region.

In the early 1970s, Soviet penetration slowed down after former Prime Minister Daoud led a bloodless coup d'état against his cousin King Mohammad Zahir Shah, declaring a presidential one-party republic. The monarchy's inability to tackle Afghanistan's social problems was identified as the root cause of this development (Gasper 2001). Others have pointed at the damaging effects of an unprecedented drought in 1971-2 as the *casus belli* for the initiation of the July 1973 coup (Gasper 2001; Dorronsoro 2005). Now President, Daoud

heavily leaned towards Iran and its Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to help in the modernisation of the country as Afghanistan was one of the most underdeveloped nations in the world at the start of the decade. This implied a soft distancing from the Soviet Union and a gentle rapprochement with the United States, which had assisted Iran in strengthening its monarchy in 1953: Daoud “was happiest when he could light his American cigarettes with Soviet matches” (in Emadi 2001, p. 30). In other words, Daoud kept both superpowers close enough to ensure their help in improving Afghanistan’s backward status.

### *3.1.1 The Soviet invasion*

These developments angered many leftist groups, among which the most organised was the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-Leninist political party established in 1965 by Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal. However, because of their internal divisions, they could not effectively move against the government. In fact, Taraki’s supporters insisted on implementing radical socialist reforms with whatever means available (*Khalq* faction), while Karmal’s followers believed in a gradual transformation of society by taking advantage of the existing state system (*Parcham* faction) (Gasper 2001). In 1977, the two leaders set their differences aside and united the party, enabling them to take action against Daoud. Indeed, in April 1978, PDPA supporters ousted Daoud, murdered him and most of his family, and installed the USSR-backed socialist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in what became known as the Saur (April) Revolution.

Taraki was elected president, but still struggling with finding a single policy path to implement socialism in the country, the two factions of the People’s Democratic Party began fighting each other, plunging the country into chaos. Owing to unpopular land reforms implemented by the brutal secret police of Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, the Taraki government also alienated large part of the Afghan population, which mostly lived in the

countryside: “The regime had no choice now but to crush much of the population” with “mass arrests [...] commonly followed by torture and execution without trial” (Chaliand 1982, pp. 39-41). Resistance groups began to form around conservative Islamic leaders who referred to themselves as ‘mujahideen’ (holy warriors).

At that moment, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev advised the president to remove Amin and to adopt a calm posture towards the Afghan rebels, probably understanding that the potential for revolution was disintegrating. However, in late September 1979, Amin had Taraki arrested and killed. Although Afghanistan was totally dependent on Soviet economic and military aid, Amin found himself in the peculiar position of accusing the Soviet Union of wanting to overthrow the government (Anwar 1988). In late December 1979, five thousand Soviet soldiers advanced towards Kabul as a show of force to convince Amin to willingly be replaced by Karmal, but after refusing, he was arrested and killed along with thousands of his loyal soldiers (Anwar 1988). By early January 1980, the number of Soviet troops in the country had grown from a few thousands to almost one hundred thousand men (Anwar 1988).

It must not had been an easy decision for the Soviet leadership to agree on the invasion of Afghanistan. On one hand, there were two historical precedents – the interventions in Hungary (1956) and in Czechoslovakia (1968) – and the Brezhnev Doctrine, which required the Red Army to help fellow Communist regimes (Gasper 2001). On the other, there was the worry that an open invasion of Afghanistan would have led to a comparable response by the United States, even more at that moment since earlier that year the neighbouring pro-Western Iranian monarchy had been overthrown by an Islamist uprising (Welch 2013). However, an opposite perspective maintained that the Soviet leadership was not scared of a possible American counterattack as they thought Carter did not have both the means and the lack of public scrutiny needed for waging a war, as Eisenhower or Kennedy had instead in the past

(Tanner 2002). Only a few academics explored the significance of Islamic fervour as a new destabilising factor in the region, linking it with the potential humiliation for the Soviet Union of losing Afghanistan after having heavily supported the country financially for 60 years (Coll 2005; Dorronsoro 2005; Tanner 2002). The historical context presented above is fundamental to the analysis of the U.S.-funded covert operation as it reveals the shifting balance of power in Afghanistan, offering essential information on why the Afghanistan issue had been quietly developing for decades and on why the United States' attitude towards Afghanistan changed from blunt indifference to alarming priority.

### ***3.2 The initial response of President Carter***

According to the official version of history perpetrated by American government officials, the CIA began aiding Afghan rebels *after* the Soviet invasion on December 27, 1979, thus as a repercussion to a direct provocation by the Moscow regime. President Carter publicly called the invasion “a callous violation of international law” and “the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War”, which “would threaten the security of all nations” if the Soviets would “extend their control to adjacent countries” (Carter, 4 January 1980). Moreover, the invasion came to be perceived by Western nations as a Soviet move towards the Persian Gulf, which pushed the American president to declare during the State of the Union address in January 1980 what became known as the Carter Doctrine: “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (Carter, 23 January 1980). The U.S. reaction was imminent. Between mid to late January 1980, the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, flew to China and Egypt to arrange weapons transfers for Afghan rebels mustering near the border with Pakistan, which had been a U.S. ally since the mid-1950s (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998). Egyptian president Anwar Sadat

recalled being told by the American delegation: “Please open your stores for us so that we can give the Afghans the armaments they need to fight” (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998, p. 258). However, this public outrage and consequent reaction was merely hiding a duplicitous course of action as the reality of the situation was more intricate.

In reality, American interest in Afghanistan’s volatile socio-political situation could be traced to February 1979, when the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Adolph Dubs was kidnapped and killed allegedly by Afghans asking for the release of religious and political prisoners held by the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (Welch 2013). Moreover, the declassified transcript of a March 1979 meeting between high-ranking executive officials, among which Robert Gates, at the time part of the staff of the National Security Council, future CIA Director under President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush, recorded Under Secretary of Defense Walter Slocumbe asking whether “there was value in keeping the Afghan insurgency going” (in Gates 1996, pp. 144-5). American covert aid to the Afghan rebels effectively began at least six months before the invasion. On July 3, 1979, Carter authorised for the first time the covert funding of Afghan freedom fighters, who called themselves ‘mujahideen’, from the Arabic word jihad, a struggle on behalf of God (Prados 2002). Opposed to the pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, they were engaged in an armed struggle since the Saur Revolution the year before. Therefore, discussion about providing aid to the Afghan rebels began long before the physical intervention by the USSR.

Therefore, since the U.S. started aiding the rebels before the Soviet invasion, the motive could not have possibly been the one told by official government sources. Indeed, during a 1998 interview, Carter’s national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski candidly stated: “[on July 3] I wrote a note to the president [...] that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention ... We didn’t push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly

increased the probability that they would” (Jauvert 1998). And what would be the purpose of driving the Soviets into a war in Afghanistan? In the words of Representative Charles Wilson (D-TX): “There were 58’000 dead in Vietnam and we owe the Russians one” (in Stork 1986, p. 12). By entering into a conflict in hostile territory against local forces, the Red Army, and as a consequence the Soviet Union, would have drained their financial and military resources to fight an asymmetric war, in the same way the United States had been defeated by the Soviet-backed Viet Cong in Southeast Asia.

### *3.2.1 Carter: Candidate Vs. President*

Before exploring the development of the Afghan trap operation from Carter to Reagan, it would be interesting to look into Carter’s change from candidate to president. Among the many issues he mentioned before the presidential election of 1976, Jimmy Carter campaigned against the CIA, which he called “a national disgrace”, instead proposing a foreign policy platform based on the respect for the principle of non-intervention and for human rights (in Weiner 2008, p. 413). One has to remember that the Church Committee’s final report had been published the same year as the presidential election, generating a wave of protest and concern about the CIA’s unchecked powers at home and abroad. Indeed, at the beginning of his term, newly elected Carter was mainly interested in the collection and interpretation of intelligence, and not in the implementation of such intelligence through covert operations (Weiner 2008).

Nevertheless, once in office, Carter understood quite quickly that the president was not the only actor influencing the shaping of American foreign policy. The authority of other members of the executive has already been discussed by several scholars (Campbell 1990; Cohen 2003; Little 2004; Prados 1986; Scott and Rosati 2020). Among them, the national security advisor was a key figure. Carter’s Kissinger was Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-born academic who had already advised President Johnson in the late 1960s. Coming from one of

the countries most impacted by Russia's expansionism in Eastern Europe, his foreign policy vision was less focused on human rights and more on hitting the Soviet Union in its weakest spots (Yetiv 1990). Other than ordering multiple covert operations, it was him for instance, as it had happened in the past for the Nixon administration, that requested that the 40 Committee, who had already changed name under President Ford becoming the Operations Advisory Group, should have a different name, in this case the *Special Coordination Committee* (SCC) of the National Security Council (Jonhson 2001). Nevertheless, its task remained the same: overseeing covert efforts to ensure plausible deniability to the President of the United States. Therefore, this operation was again managed directly by the incumbent administration, as it had been for past covert acts.

However, looking at how the covert operation developed from the start in Afghanistan, the principle-guided vision of President Carter still seemed to be able to pierce through Brzeziński's hawkish goals. While past administrations infiltrated governments marginally linked to the USSR to prevent Soviet subversion, his administration concentrated on provoking unrest within the Soviet system among its own people, without deeming the political class or the armed forces as necessary intermediaries, as for example it had been done in Chile. But unfortunately for him, sponsoring the covert operation in Afghanistan was not enough to hide the fact that the country had been invaded by the Soviet Union in the first place. The repercussions became evident a few months later when in November 1980, Carter performed poorly at the presidential election against former Hollywood actor and former Governor of California Ronald Reagan. The scholarly debate has discussed the impact of multiple factors on the American electorate to explain Reagan's election. From one point of view, it has been argued that the worsening state of the economy, with high rates of inflation, low economic growth and high unemployment, worried Americans more than the conflict between the Red Army and groups of local rebels in an unknown country thousands of kilometres from their



home (Biven 2003). From another perspective, among those foreign policy issues that Americans truly were concerned about was the attack by Iranian students, supportive of the Iranian Revolution against the Shah, of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the subsequent hostage standoff (Kaufman 2009). From those scholars that considered the Soviet-Afghan war, the negative reaction of the American public likely derived from the absence of clear warnings from the intelligence community of an imminent Soviet invasion (Weiner 2008).

Examining the veracity of this last argument because of his relevance to this thesis, there is evidence to support such claim. Until the invasion materialised, the CIA failed to produce a conclusive report to the incumbent administration. In March 1979, the agency was confident that the USSR would “be most reluctant to introduce large numbers of ground forces into Afghanistan” (in Weiner 2008, p. 423). In late August, even with rebel attacks growing and Carter authorising the sending of money and medical aid to the anti-government forces, the CIA persuaded the president that “an escalation of Soviet military involvement in the form of a direct combat role” was not likely (in MacEachin 2002, p. 19). In December, ten days before the invasion, the best Soviet analysts of the CIA were sure that “the pace of Soviet deployment [did] not indicate contingencies of an urgent nature”, meaning that the recent movement of Soviet forces did not entail the possibility of a large-scale attack happening in the short term (in Plügge 2023, p. 264). After the invasion, the administration rushed to show the public their involvement in countering such invasion to avoid backlash. CIA Director Stansfield Turner declared that the agency “was pushing everything through the pipeline that the Pakistanis were willing to receive” (in Little 2004, p. 689). Nonetheless, the combination of the above-mentioned factors doomed Carter’s chances for reelection.

### ***3.3 The escalation of Operation Cyclone under President Reagan***

The operation under Carter was not immediately stepped up when Reagan became the president. Nevertheless, the role of the mujahideen in destabilising Soviet control over Afghanistan was taken more seriously. This is noticeable from the amount of funds allocated to the operation. In his first directive, Carter authorised about \$700'000 to help the mujahideen, while in his first executive decision Reagan provided around \$30 million (Powelson 2003). It is an indication of how important containing and pushing back the Soviet forces in Afghanistan became for America's foreign policy objectives. It was only in March 1985 that Reagan escalated the operation by signing National Security Decision Directive 166. Why? The answer is simple: reelection. To improve one's chances of reelection and reduce the probability that a scandal could ruin these chances, American presidents have always preferred leaning into their more hawkish foreign policy plans during their second mandate, as they would not risk anything being two terms the maximum an American president can serve. Usually, the president's focus in the first term is domestic policy in order to maintain high support among the electorate to win a second time and then focus more on international issues (Scott and Rosati 2020).

The total worth of aid given in 1986 was \$125 million more than what had been provided in 1985 (Callanan 2010). The main difference was that from that moment on the mujahideen would not simply receive arms and ammunition, but also:

“satellite reconnaissance data of Soviet targets [...], plans for military operations [...], intercepts of Soviet communications, secret communications networks [...], delayed timing devices for tons of C-4 plastic explosives for urban sabotage and sophisticated guerrilla attacks [...], a targeting device for mortars that was linked to a U.S. Navy satellite, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and other equipment” (Coll 1992).

In total, the U.S. alone channelled at least \$3 billion in military aid to the mujahideen, ranging from \$30-50 million in the 1980-4 period to \$250-300 million in the 1985-89 period (Valentine 2016). This money was collected and forwarded to the proper parties by privatised CIA funds, such as the Afghan American Educational Fund, which thanks to its innocuous name was able to both hide the CIA's direct role in the operation and effectively lobby groups that were willing to sponsor the mujahideen struggle (De Lauri and Suhrke 2021). To this purpose, the Soviet-Afghan war began to appear more and more on Americans' television screens. Acknowledging that it is forbidden by law for the U.S. government to carry out open domestic propaganda, the Reagan administration, in particular Brzeziński, constructed a narrative convincing enough to be spread across America by news channels (Powelson 2003). In order to justify their own covert operation, the government needed to portray the war as a struggle for independence and liberty on the part of the anti-Soviet Afghans, avoiding exposing the CIA's presence in coordinating the entire affair. Indeed, President Reagan invited a group of mujahideen leaders to the White House's Oval Office in 1983, applauding their efforts against the Red Enemy and calling them "freedom fighters" and "freedom loving people" (in Bates 2011, p. 98).

Reagan's worldview was fundamentally different from Carter's, which was reflected in his appointment of a new CIA Director: William J. Casey. Due to his radical Catholic convictions, he saw the Cold War as the fight of God against the devil, with the Soviet Union unmistakably representing the latter (Teitler 2020). In the same way, the Republic president did not believe that the Cold War was a contest for global power, but of good against evil. If the world was in perpetual tension due to the nuclear arms race, the Soviet Union was to be blamed for it all (Riedel 2014). The black-and-white outlook influenced its thoughts about the true purpose of the CIA: waging a universal war against the "evil empire" (Reagan, 8 March 1983). It is for this reason that in 1986, after being elected for a second term, Reagan approved Pakistan's biggest military request: Stinger surface-to-air missiles. By doing so, he essentially

ended one of the pillars of U.S. covert action – plausible deniability – since the administration decided to provide American-made weapons, thus indirectly revealing their involvement. Early in his administration, Reagan had criticised Carter’s actions for not immediately shipping weapons, but instead focusing on hurting the pro-Soviet regime through indirect means, such as sanctions. “Pigs, cows, and chickens [did not attack Afghanistan],” he argued once (Riedel 2014, p. 112). What changed from the past that permitted the shipment of American arms to third parties?

### *3.3.1 Charlie Wilson’s war: The role of Congress in financing covert operations*

Unlike past covert operations, Operation Cyclone enjoyed broad bipartisan support both in the House of Representatives and the Senate. As a matter of fact, Congress’ role in providing even more funds than what the Reagan administration asked was based on a simple premise, namely that the United States was responding to a blatant provocation by the USSR. According to American congressmen, the Soviets had ventured too far by deciding to physically invade a country that already belonged to their sphere of influence (Tanner 2002). The missing detail was that they were not aware that covert acts in Afghanistan had begun months before the Soviet invasion, which might have changed the minds of at least some among them. Nevertheless, other historians maintained that the possibility to hurt the Soviet Union, as the U.S. had been hurt in Vietnam, trumped any moral considerations about who intervened first in Afghanistan (Crile 2003; Kuperman 1999; Little 2004). A politician that stood out for his fervent and persistent support for the mujahideen cause was Charlie Wilson (D-TX).

According to Wilson himself, he had always been a supporter of the underdog, of those who could not protect themselves (Crile 2003). Previously having increased aid to Israel to \$3 billion annually following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Wilson was able to maximise America’s

escalation of the war owing to his membership in several key committees, such as the House Appropriations Subcommittee of Defense, which, together with the Senate Subcommittee, was responsible for black appropriations, namely the funds to be allocated by the U.S. government to top secret projects (Crile 2003). The situation that developed bordered on the absurd, as because of the extremely strong popularity the mujahideen's endeavours enjoyed within Congress, the Reagan administration found itself in the strange spot of having to do more rather than less, resulting in the abandonment of plausible deniability, which had kept the U.S. hand hidden in the past.

Moreover, the relevance of having a favourable legislature did not only entail the availability of more funds, but also the better-kept secrecy around the actual figures spent by year by the U.S. government to aid the mujahideen. The limited information available to the media, and hence to the electorate, allowed ever-increasing amounts of money to be used without the worry of public scrutiny (Stork 1986). This means that, as of today, most documents relating to Operation Cyclone have yet to be declassified. Opposite to the operation against Allende, congressional inquiries did not proliferate, as Congress had a direct role in the entire undertaking.

Although Congress knew that the central issue was the strategical position of Afghanistan and the worry associated with the possibility of the Soviet Union reaching the Indian Ocean and consequently the Persian Gulf, thus threatening the ownership of oil flows, it supported the administration's narrative of the U.S. fighting for the freedom of the Afghan people (Prados 2002). For example, the inhumane treatment of Afghan babies by the Red Army was often broadcasted to the American public (Prados 1986). This was likely done to prevent any claim of legitimacy for the Soviet invasion or any proposal to decrease the amount spent by the government to be advanced by detractors of the covert operation. Therefore, through

intense propaganda at home, the issue of billions of taxpayer dollars being spent for Operation Cyclone remained mostly unscathed from public scrutiny.

### *3.3.2 The importance of Pakistan and other allied nations*

There is a key argument to clarify and further argue in favour of about this covert operation: if the United States had not been assisted by allied nations in its effort to arm the mujahideen, Operation Cyclone would have ended as rapidly as it had started. The central question is why these countries, especially those in the Middle East, offered to help a Western nation to escalate a war that could have possibly spilled across Afghanistan's borders and impacted the stability of the entire region. Some academics argued that the Soviet-Afghan war was understood by Muslim nations as the final battle between capitalism and communism, which they saw as an evil that needed to be purged, while capitalism offered them the means to modernise their countries (Goodson 2001). Some others instead concentrated on demonstrating that Middle Eastern policymakers saw the war as "a convenient political dumping ground for frustrated clerical activists of the middle classes and the restive lumpen proletariat" (Parenti 2001, p. 32). Indeed, this last argument is supported by the growing numbers of international volunteers that in the 1980s joined the mujahideen side. Well-known names were present among them. Charged and imprisoned for conspiring in the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat, Ayman al-Zawahiri fled to Afghanistan in 1984 to aid the mujahideen cause, putting to use his training as a surgeon (Burke 1999). He would later become a wanted terrorist for his role in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and a leading figure in al-Qaeda, replacing Osama bin Laden as General Emir after his death in 2011.

Moving on to nationwide efforts, Pakistan's part in the covert operation came to represent the closest thing to a centralised command structure. Its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the largest component of Pakistan's intelligence community, led by General Akhtar

Abdur Rahman, and its Afghan Bureau became the intermediary between the CIA and the mujahideen network. There has been discussion over the motivating force behind Afghanistan's neighbour to the east and south reaching across the border to help the mujahideen. Probably the most convincing arguments stated that the Pakistani leadership was concerned that a potential Soviet victory in Afghanistan would have encouraged the USSR to look at Pakistan with predatory eyes (Weiner 2008). Indeed, General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, President of Pakistan from 1978 to 1988, declared that everything possible must be tried to "openly oppose or deter any Soviet military thrust across Pakistan's border" (in Coll 2005, p. 43). Reminding the reader of the region's geography, Pakistan lies on the coasts of the Indian Ocean just before the entrance to the Persian Gulf, thus being of great strategic importance and representing the quickest way for the Soviet Union to reach their imperialistic goals. Moreover, the USSR likely saw the creation of a Soviet corridor in South Asia as a way to counter Western and Chinese growing influences in the region (Saivetz 1989).

Pakistan's role as intermediary proved necessary as the CIA did not have military bases in Afghanistan to which deliver the shipments of weapons and ammunition, thus making Pakistan the pipeline through which to communicate and aid the mujahideen. Furthermore, Pakistani leadership allowed the creation of training camps near the border with Afghanistan, precisely in the city of Peshawar. Wanting to take advantage of the incredible number of fleeing Afghans, about 5 millions, at the time the largest group of refugees in the world, ISI agents and mujahideen leaders coordinated the enlisting of thousands by playing on their resentment towards the Soviet Army (Dorrnsoro 2005). Moreover, the CIA consented to the recruiting of international volunteers, basically mercenaries and religious fanatics, directly on American soil, with the opening of recruiting centres in San Francisco, New York and Detroit (Cooley 2002). This lack of judgement essentially derived from the tunnel vision of American

policymakers, who seemed to see exclusively the final goal of the covert operation in total disregard for the potential collateral damage.

Another country whose help became fundamental was Egypt, which at the start of the operation was governed by Anwar Sadat and after his assassination by Hosni Mubarak. As already mentioned, Egypt's help was requested soon after the invasion of the Soviet Union in December 1979. Across the ten years of Operation Cyclone, the North African country did not merely offer weapons, but also training and allegedly air force bases for weapon and other aid shipments with Pakistan as the final destination (Little 2004). The exchange was not one-sided as Egypt emptied its inventories of Soviet-model weapons, only for them to be replenished with new American military hardware (Cooley 2002). Moreover, the Reagan administration, with the necessary help from Congress, passed foreign-assistance packages worth billions of dollars to secure Egypt's continuous participation in the operation (Crile 2003). It is obvious that the developing North African country, plagued by mass poverty, unemployment, social unrest and increasing numbers of terrorist attacks, could not refuse such offers.

Finally, Saudi Arabia proved fundamental in secretly matching the funds disbursed by the United States, therefore doubling the amount available to the accomplishment of Operation Cyclone (Stork 1986). Similar to America's and Pakistan's motives, also viewing communism as heresy, the Saudi leadership saw the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan with deep concern representing a threat to their oil wealth in the Persian Gulf (Coll 2005). Through Pakistan's aid, the victory of Afghanistan's anti-Soviet side was crucial to contain Soviet ambitions. Moreover, there was a deeply religious belief that went beyond statecraft, which the United States government could not fully grasp, but inevitably linked the Western country with Islamic radicalism for decades in the future: "both [Pakistan and Saudi Arabia] believed fervently in the importance of an Islamic brotherhood which ignored territorial frontiers" (Coll 2005, p. 73). The two countries shared Islam as a central part of their national identity. The



creation of a transnational movement of militant Muslims resonated with the mujahideen cause, thus providing an arena for cooperation. Therefore, other than considerable money transfers, legions of Saudis flocked to join the Afghan side, among them there was a young Osama bin Laden.

Thanks to its father's successful construction business a close friend of the Saudi royal family, especially of Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, the head of Saudi intelligence (1979-2001), Osama bin Laden had built a good reputation around his strong support for contemporary Islamic jihad. Indeed, his first visit to Pakistan to meet with mujahideen leaders occurred early in the war, with some, for example Goodson (2001), arguing that he became involved weeks after the invasion of December 1979, while others maintaining that he only joined the Afghan rebels after 1981, such as Gates (1996). Nevertheless, bin Laden became a crucial figure for the mujahideen's survival, employing his construction firm to improve and reconstruct the Afghan and Pakistani infrastructure damaged by Soviet bombings, such as roads, railways, hospitals and schools (Marsden 1998). Other than aiding the mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet invader, bin Laden became essential in the radicalisation of the Muslim youth, mainly composed of Afghans fleeing the war. The construction of hundreds of madrassas (Islamic schools where the study of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, is key to a child's education) was used to both galvanise support among the younger layers of society for the mujahideen's fight and to instil in them more austere Islamic creeds (Marsden 1998).

It is generally accepted that bin Laden mistrusted both Pakistan's ISI and the U.S. CIA, a sentiment shared with the Saudi royal family, who in fact used autonomous channels to fund the mujahideen, especially the most radical ones that disavowed the existence of direct contacts with Western infidels (Grau and Gress 2002). What should be made clear is the uncertainty around the provision of CIA funds to bin Laden. Coll (2005) asserted that bin Laden worked independently under the supervision of the Saudi government and that he moved outside of

CIA eyesight. This opinion seems to be corroborated by the fact that, from personal research into the archives of declassified documents on Operation Cyclone, there is no mention of direct links between CIA agents stationed in Pakistan or in Saudi Arabia, and Osama bin Laden during the 1980s. However, as it has already been mentioned, there exists the strong possibility that several top-secret documents are still fully classified and that, for reasons of national security, they will not be declassified any time soon. On the other hand, Bergen and Tiedemann (2013) speculated that, since one of the mujahideen commanders most financed by the CIA, Jalaluddin Haqqani, had a close relationship with bin Laden, then arguing that at least marginally the CIA had contacts with Osama bin Laden is a version of history probably not too far from the truth.

### *3.3.3 The internal fragmentation of the Afghan mujahideen*

American-sponsored covert action was not the motivating force behind the attacks of the Afghan rebels as that would be a misperception of the context that led to the Soviet intervention. They had conducted guerrilla attacks against government forces for at least a year before any type of covert initiative was approved by the United States. This allowed them to take control of most of the mountainous countryside of the nation, confining the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to the cities and large towns (Teitler 2020). However, it would be a grave mistake for the reader to consider the mujahideen a united front against the Soviet army. It needs to be clear that Afghanistan's political system was a two-handed institution; on one side, power was concentrated in the hands of the king and afterwards the president, on the other, feudal structures, centred around Islamic traditions, persisted outside of the cities with local landlords commanding over clans or tribes (Male 1982). As the pro-Soviet forces withdrew from the countryside, these individuals gained an increasingly important and independent role in mobilising the population to fight the Soviet troops.

Scholars have debated on the limitations of a rebellious but divided people willing to fight against a common, united enemy, like the Red Army. On one side, the lack of a single power commanding and organising the rebels would have led to a quick defeat, a repetition of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and of the Prague Spring of 1968 (Westad 2017). The solution to this first problem proved simple as the U.S. and other countries started to heavily finance them through shipments of economic, military and technical aid. However, it would be an overestimation of the ability of this material assistance to be considered the final answer to the mujahideen's problems against Soviet forces, the first of which was the initial low numbers of fighters available. As a matter of fact, it was the Soviets themselves that helped the Afghan rebels in their mobilisation efforts. When the Soviet army realised it could not get to the rebel forces, which were sheltering in the mountainous terrain, it began to wage war against the civilian population. There were two intertwined motives behind this decision. First, they thought that attacking their brothers and sisters would have drawn them out of the mountains and faced them on less impervious grounds (Prados 2002). Second, they wanted to preemptively eliminate any form of local support the mujahideen could have garnered from the countryside villages (Welch 2013). This strategy badly backfired as it delegitimised the Soviet army in the Afghans' eyes and created massive fluxes of emigrants towards neighbouring countries, in particular Pakistan, leading locals to resent the Soviets and join the rebel side.

Due to the frustration of not being able to fight the mujahideen in open-field battles, the Soviet army began to indiscriminately attack the civilian population, in both direct and indirect ways. They mined roads, dry riverbeds, mountain passes and slopes hoping to cause as much damage as possible to those escaping the war by attempting to reach the border with Pakistan (Grau and Gress 2002). Moreover, they bombed pastures and farmland, concurrently killing herds of sheep, goats and camels (Marsden 1998). Owing to Afghans mostly surviving on agricultural and livestock products, these bombing campaigns caused more devastation than if

the Soviets had directly bombed their villages. Furthermore, Red Army soldiers were notorious for conducting looting campaigns before and after destroying entire villages (Weiner 2008). All things considered, the Soviets could not blame the Afghan population for not being willing to join forces with them.

Going back to the mujahideen, the lack of a unified leadership, hence the existence of multiple commanders, also implied different goals, ways and means to achieve them, a situation that evolved into open fights among the various mujahideen factions (Campbell 2017). What short-term goal could they have pursued to explain why they would engage in hostilities with each other, thus reducing the chances of a collective Afghan victory? The main reason for their clashes was for larger access to lucrative *Papaver somniferum* plantations, from whose dried latex the potent drug heroin is derived. Although by the mid-1980s the mujahideen were being sent tens, or even hundreds, of millions of dollars in arms and money, as high as 80% of it never reached them due to high levels of corruption among the political and military leaders responsible for the distribution of aid to the rebel forces on the battle front (Stork 1986). Therefore, it seems obvious that the Afghan forces looked to find other potential sources of revenue, the consequences of which became soon visible even in distant parts of the world. In 1984, only in the United States, narcotics traffic grossed \$110 billion, \$10 billion of which came from heroin produced in Afghanistan (Robinson 1985). This resulted in overdose deaths increasing by more than 90% between the beginning of the covert operation and the mid-1980s (Parenti 2001).

Nonetheless, their internal divisions did not stop them from committing atrocious crimes against Soviet forces. In 1985-6, two articles were published in *The Washington Post* describing the conditions under which imprisoned soldiers were being held: “CIA-supported insurgents drugged, tortured and forced from 50 to 200 Soviet prisoners to live like animals in cages” and “there are 70 Russian prisoners living lives of indescribable horror” (Woodward

and Babcock 1985; Ottaway 1986). The flip side of the coin needs to be reported to portray as much as possible an unbiased picture of what unfolded during those ten years of ferocious fighting. These small numbers are only individual accounts of situations that were presumably repeated numerous other times during the Afghan-Soviet war. Another early report informed readers that the mujahideen liked to “torture victims by first cutting off their noses, ears, and genitals, then removing one slice of skin after another” (Randal 1979).

It is evident that, since the last article was published before the escalation of Operation Cyclone, the United States government was fully aware of the kind of people they were sending weapons to. This was not accidental, as it has been argued by Gates (1996) and Goodson (2001) that the United States explicitly provided more funds to the most extreme mujahideen factions in order to damage the Red Army more rapidly and efficiently. For instance, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, “a particularly fanatical fundamentalist and woman-hater”, received disproportionately large quantity of weapons (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998, p. 263). His followers gained the attention of the U.S. “by throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil” (Weiner 2008, p. 149). Other than rapidity and ruthlessness in the execution, it was Brzeziński who offered a deeper explanation as to why the mujahideen’s extremism was something that the Carter and the Reagan administrations took into account before providing them with weapons. As a matter of fact, driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan was merely the immediate objective. The American administrations thought desirable exporting the Afghan Islamic fervour “to the Muslim-majority Central Asian states and Soviet Republics with a view to destroying the Soviet order” (in Hiro 1999). If fermenting Islamic unrest worked in Afghanistan, why could it not be used to provide a final solution to the bipolar system? However, in the end there was not enough time to implement this strategy since the Soviet Union collapsed merely two years after the Afghan victory owing to domestic causes.

### ***3.4 The withdrawal of Soviet troops***

By the end of the decade, the several billions of dollars spent arming and training the mujahideen seemed to have been put to good use. Soviet military deaths were significant, with estimates being as high as 26'000 at the end of the war, excluding the 18'000 pro-government Afghan soldiers who were also killed (Tanner 2002). More importantly, the Soviet Union's financial losses were massive, with early estimates by Prados (1986) in the range of \$5-7 billion a year, meaning that the costs were over \$15 million a day. However, it would be incorrect to presume that until the end the Soviet leadership did not fathom that their forces were losing the war. Indeed, when Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed as the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, one of his first foreign policy decisions regarded plans for gradually withdrawing from Afghanistan. Gorbachev famously referred to the ongoing conflict as "a bleeding wound" in 1986 (in Welch 2013, p. 177).

So why did the withdrawal only commence in late January 1989? Scholars focused on two main motives. On one side, the Soviets saw the pro-Soviet government, which from 1986 was headed by Mohammad Najibullah, the former director of KHAD, the Afghan equivalent of the Soviet KGB, as too fragile, predicting that without proper stabilisation it would have collapsed after their withdrawal (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998). Indeed, this opinion was shared by the American intelligence community, which in a March 1988 assessment anticipated an even worse outcome: "The Najibullah regime will not long survive the completion of Soviet withdrawal, even with continued Soviet assistance. The regime may fall before withdrawal is complete" (in Gutman 2008, p. 12). On the other, the domestic reforms that were being implemented by Gorbachev to restructure the political and economic system of the Soviet Union took precedence over any foreign policy issue, except for those aimed at reducing tensions in the European context (Westad 2017). Nevertheless, when the withdrawal finally happened, it was extremely rapid as on February 15 all troops had already crossed the border

and returned home. On the same day, the Chief of the CIA station in Pakistan, Milton Bearden, sent a concise all-capital message to the CIA headquarters: “WE WON” (in Riedel 2014, p. 127). After 10 years from the initial Soviet intervention, Operation Cyclone achieved its aim: driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The Afghan-Soviet war was the last large-scale confrontation between the two superpowers of the Cold War before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The U.S. covert operation, codenamed Operation Cyclone, established the organisational structure behind the mujahideen’s victory in 1989 thanks to the fundamental help provided by allied nations, in particular Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Focusing on these countries proved essential to undermine exaggerated accounts of America’s exceptionalism in unilaterally shaping the domestic politics of foreign nations. The seemingly endless availability of funds helped the United States to achieve its foreign policy goals, but at the same time these allied countries were able to weaponise America’s geopolitical concerns for their own ends. The continuous arming of the mujahideen was thus able to reach the desired conclusion that Brzezinski anticipated ten years prior: straining the Soviet Union’s economy as revenge for the Vietnam fiasco and stopping their advance towards the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the Soviet defeat demonstrated their failure to comprehend the necessity to win the loyalty of the civilian population to turn the tide of war, instead forcing millions of Afghans into Pakistani refugee camps, from which disgruntled youth could be easily recruited by the mujahideen.

## CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examined the history of covert operations sponsored by the government of the United States and implemented through the Central Intelligence Agency, focusing on two major case studies: the overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende (1970-3) and the financing of the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89). Starting with more modest goals, for instance the nonviolent efforts to ensure the victory of the Democrazia Cristiana in the 1948 Italian election, successive administrations directed more and more funds to conduct covert operations, understood as a foreign policy tool to easily and with no backlash shape the course of events in foreign nations to favour American national interests. The Truman and Eisenhower executives justified their intervention by appealing to the fears of an expansionist Soviet Union and to the need to first contain and then roll back the advance of communism. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the prerogatives and powers of the CIA through the National Security Act of 1947 allowed the authorisation of covert operations outside of congressional oversight.

What has been called the Golden Age of covert action simply referred to a period, more or less corresponding to Eisenhower's presidential terms, during which the CIA carried out or sponsored military coups in several regions of the world thanks to a massive expansion of resources devoted to the achievement of foreign policy objectives in a clandestine manner. This thesis considered Operation Ajax in Iran and Operation PBSuccess and its follow-up Operation PBHistory in Guatemala as the central actions of such era. The overthrow of the Mossadegh and Arbenz regimes convinced the American president in office, but also future presidential candidates, such as Eisenhower's vice-president, Richard Nixon, that covert action could be the solution to problems that could have not been addressed overtly owing to the wider context of the conflict between the U.S. and the USSR.

After Arbenz's removal and Castro's isolation, the possible democratic election of a socialist president in the Western Hemisphere worried the Nixon administration. Being unable



to prevent its election, for three years the CIA, aided by other government agencies and under National Security Advisor Kissinger's attentive eyes, worked tirelessly to sabotage the popular consensus around which Allende based its presidency. Concentrating on creating tensions within the military and the political elites, the United States spent millions on spreading anti-Allende propaganda thanks to the help of Chile's most popular newspaper, El Mercurio. Owing to fierce domestic opposition and foreign interference, the socialist government was overthrown in a bloody coup during which Allende committed suicide.

The period going from the Cuban fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 to the publication of the Church Report in 1976, largely due to the publicisation by the American media of failed covert and overt operations, was characterised by more stringent congressional supervision of the conduct of the CIA. The era of optimism and naivete came to an end as the executive became aware that covert action failures carried the potential to create adverse repercussions both domestically and internationally. For example, the covert operation to unseat Fidel Castro pushed him to establish a closer alliance with the Soviet Union, unfolding a sequence of events that culminated with the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. It became clear that certain elements within the CIA desiring to see their planned missions turn into successes pushed the incumbent administration to implement them, even when they were visibly unsuitable and incompatible with the reality of the situation.

Covert action regained momentum in the 1980s with Operation Cyclone, initiated by President Carter, but escalated under President Reagan. Backed by a political establishment eager to trap the Soviets in an Afghan quagmire, as it had happened to their army in Vietnam, the CIA established early contacts with Egypt and Pakistan, the former to be a weapons provider and the latter to coordinate and train the Afghan rebels. The billions invested by the U.S. were quietly matched by Saudi Arabia's conservative Islamic monarchy, although with other intended goals, such as the foundation of a transborder Islamic brotherhood. In the U.S.,

the operation was constructed as a fight for freedom, framing the aid as necessary to help the mujahideen against the tyranny of the Soviet Union. Plagued by corruption and leading to increased heroin traffic, the operation succeeded in driving the Red Army out of the country mostly due to the Soviet Union's crumbling internal situation, which Gorbachev needed to prioritise.

All of these operations shared a common narrative perpetrated by the U.S. government: the United States was *forced* to interfere in these nations' domestic political development as the first aggressive step had been already taken by the Soviet Union. Cold-War covert action was sold to the American public and among allied nations as a defence against Soviet expansion and subversion, even in cases in which connections to the Soviet Union had not been proven, for example in Allende's Chile. The U.S. was merely responding to direct or indirect provocations by Moscow's government. Moreover, the U.S. government portrayed itself as a promoter of those who were struggling for freedom, even when that meant funding radical extremists or ruthless mercenaries. The public commitment to respect and defend human rights made by numerous presidents hid their covert undertakings, financing dubious members of foreign societies in favour of their short-term goals.

In conclusion, thanks to early success against weaker regimes, the CIA established its myth, namely that through covert action the United States had the power to change the world and shape it in its own image. This thesis attempted to provide evidence to argue the exact opposite. Due to the tunnel vision of most American policymakers during the Cold War, covert action in and out the Western Hemisphere led to weakened systems of government, headed by despotic leaders, who despised liberal democratic values. Although some operations could be deemed a success, in the sense that they achieved the short-term goal set by American decisionmakers before the start of the operation, in the long run the backlash of these major covert operations has been evident.

In Iran, anti-American feelings increased to the point of becoming one of the foundations of the new theocratic regime after the removal of the pro-Western Shah and the instalment of Ayatollah Khomeini as supreme leader. In Guatemala, the officer that led the coup against Arbenz, Carlos Castillo Armas, began a campaign of political persecution, which strengthened anti-American sentiment in Latin America and led to his assassination in 1957. Afterwards, the country was afflicted by a civil war for more than thirty-five years (1960-96). In Cuba, Fidel Castro became reliant on the Soviets, accepting missile deployments that brought the world to the edge of nuclear war. In Chile, a military dictatorship was led by General Augusto Pinochet for seventeen years, destroying the democratic foundations of the country. In Afghanistan, the financing of the mujahideen, in particular of the most radical among them, accelerated the Soviet withdrawal and led to the complete dismantling of the country's political institutions, creating a power vacuum that was easily filled by the Taliban only a few years later. From the perspective of the Washington government, leaving these countries to develop on their own terms would have been worse than intervening. From the perspective of Third World countries, American interference devastated populations and landscapes, leaving them more vulnerable to future disasters. The human tragedies derived from these operations left a mark on those who survived, creating issues that the United States still faces today.

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