

Kissinger and Chile: The Declassified Record on Regime Change

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Global Research, September 12, 2013

[The National Security Archive](#) 11 September 2013

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Kissinger pressed Nixon to overthrow the democratically elected Allende government because his “‘model’ effect can be insidious,” documents show

On 40th anniversary of coup, Archive posts top ten documents on Kissinger’s role in undermining democracy, supporting military dictatorship in Chile

Kissinger overruled aides on military regime’s human rights atrocities; told Pinochet in 1976: “We want to help, not undermine you. You did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende.”

National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 437

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Washington, D.C. – Henry Kissinger urged President Richard Nixon to overthrow the democratically elected Allende government in Chile because his “‘model’ effect can be insidious,” according to documents posted today by the National Security Archive. The coup against Allende occurred on this date 40 years ago. The posted records spotlight Kissinger’s role as the principal policy architect of U.S. efforts to oust the Chilean leader, and assist in the consolidation of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

The documents, which include transcripts of Kissinger’s “telcons” — telephone conversations — that were never shown to the special Senate Committee chaired by Senator Frank Church in the mid 1970s, provide key details about the arguments, decisions, and operations Kissinger made and supervised during his tenure as national security adviser and secretary of state.

“These documents provide the verdict of history on Kissinger’s singular contribution to the denouement of democracy and rise of dictatorship in Chile,” said Peter Kornbluh who directs the Chile Documentation Project at the National Security Archive. “They are the evidence of his accountability for the events of forty years ago.”

Today’s posting includes a Kissinger “telcon” with Nixon that records their first conversation after the coup. During the conversation Kissinger tells Nixon that the U.S. had “helped” the coup. “[Word omitted] created the conditions as best as possible.” When Nixon complained

about the “liberal crap” in the media about Allende’s overthrow, Kissinger advised him: “In the Eisenhower period, we would be heroes.”

That “telcon” is published for the first time in the newly revised edition of Kornbluh’s book, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, (The New Press, 2013), which has been re-released for the 40th anniversary of the coup. Several of the other documents posted today appeared for the first time in the original edition, which the *Los Angeles Times* listed as a [“Best Book” of 2003](#).

Among the key revelations in the documents:

- On September 12, eight days after Allende’s election, Kissinger initiated discussion on the telephone with CIA director Richard Helms about a preemptive coup in Chile. “We will not let Chile go down the drain,” Kissinger declared. “I am with you,” Helms responded. Their conversation took place three days before President Nixon, in a 15-minute meeting that included Kissinger, ordered the CIA to “make the economy scream,” and named Kissinger as the supervisor of the covert efforts to keep Allende from being inaugurated. Since the Kissinger/Helms “telcon” was not known to the Church Committee, the Senate report on U.S. intervention in Chile and subsequent histories date the initiation of U.S. efforts to sponsor regime change in Chile to the September 15 meeting.
- Kissinger ignored a recommendation from his top deputy on the NSC, Viron Vaky, who strongly advised against covert action to undermine Allende. On September 14, Vaky wrote a memo to Kissinger arguing that coup plotting would lead to “widespread violence and even insurrection.” He also argued that such a policy was immoral: “What we propose is patently a violation of our own principles and policy tenets If these principles have any meaning, we normally depart from them only to meet the gravest threat to us, e.g. to our survival. Is Allende a mortal threat to the U.S.? It is hard to argue this.”
- After U.S. covert operations, which led to the assassination of Chilean Commander in Chief of the Armed forces General Rene Schneider, failed to stop Allende’s inauguration on November 4, 1970, Kissinger lobbied President Nixon to reject the State Department’s recommendation that the U.S. seek a *modus vivendi* with Allende. In an eight-page secret briefing paper that provided Kissinger’s clearest rationale for regime change in Chile, he emphasized to Nixon that “the election of Allende as president of Chile poses for us one of the most serious challenges ever faced in this hemisphere” and “your decision as to what to do about it may be the most historic and difficult foreign affairs decision you will make this year.” Not only were a billion dollars of U.S. investments at stake, Kissinger reported, but what he called “the insidious model effect” of his democratic election. There was no way for the U.S. to deny Allende’s legitimacy, Kissinger noted, and if he succeeded in peacefully reallocating resources in Chile in a socialist direction, other countries might follow suit. “The example of a successful elected Marxist government in Chile would surely have an impact on — and even precedent value for — other parts of the world, especially in Italy; the imitative spread of similar phenomena elsewhere would in turn significantly affect the world balance and our own position in it.” The next day Nixon made it clear to the entire National Security Council that the policy would be to bring Allende down. “Our main concern,” he stated, “is the prospect that he can consolidate himself and the picture projected to the world will be his success.”

- In the days following the coup, Kissinger ignored the concerns of his top State Department aides about the massive repression by the new military regime. He sent secret instructions to his ambassador to convey to Pinochet “our strongest desires to cooperate closely and establish firm basis for cordial and most constructive relationship.” When his assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs asked him what to tell Congress about the reports of hundreds of people being killed in the days following the coup, he issued these instructions: “I think we should understand our policy-that however unpleasant they act, this government is better for us than Allende was.” The United States assisted the Pinochet regime in consolidating, through economic and military aide, diplomatic support and CIA assistance in creating Chile’s infamous secret police agency, DINA.
- At the height of Pinochet’s repression in 1975, Secretary Kissinger met with the Chilean foreign minister, Admiral Patricio Carvajal. Instead of taking the opportunity to press the military regime to improve its human rights record, Kissinger opened the meeting by disparaging his own staff for putting the issue of human rights on the agenda. “I read the briefing paper for this meeting and it was nothing but Human Rights,” he told Carvajal. “The State Department is made up of people who have a vocation for the ministry. Because there are not enough churches for them, they went into the Department of State.”
- As Secretary Kissinger prepared to meet General Augusto Pinochet in Santiago in June 1976, his top deputy for Latin America, William D. Rogers, advised him to press the dictator to “improve human rights practices” and make human rights central to U.S.-Chilean relations and to press the dictator to “improve human rights practices.” Instead, a declassified transcript of their conversation reveals, Kissinger told Pinochet that his regime was a victim of leftist propaganda on human rights. “In the United States, as you know, we are sympathetic with what you are trying to do here,” Kissinger told Pinochet. “We want to help, not undermine you. You did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende.”

At a special “Tribute to Justice” on September 9, 2013, in New York, Kornbluh received the Charles Horman Truth Foundation Award for the Archive’s work in obtaining the declassification of thousands of formerly secret documents on Chile after Pinochet’s arrest in London in October 1998. Other awardees included Spanish Judge Baltazar Garzon who had Pinochet detained in London; and Chilean judge Juan Guzman who prosecuted him after he returned to [Chile in 2000](#).

THE DOCUMENTS

[Document 1](#): Telcon, Helms – Kissinger, September 12, 1970, 12:00 noon.

[Document 2](#): Viron Vaky to Kissinger, “Chile — 40 Committee Meeting, Monday — September 14,” September 14, 1970.

[Document 3](#): Handwritten notes, Richard Helms, “Meeting with President,” September 15, 1970.

[Document 4](#): White House, Kissinger, Memorandum for the President, “Subject: NSC Meeting, November 6-Chile,” November 5, 1970.

[Document 5](#): Kissinger, Memorandum for the President, "Covert Action Program-Chile, November 25, 1970.

[Document 6](#): National Security Council, Memorandum, Jeanne W. Davis to Kissinger, "Minutes of the WSAG Meeting of September 12, 1973," September 13, 1973.

[Document 7](#): Telcon, Kissinger – Nixon, September 16, 1973, 11:50 a.m.

[Document 8](#): Department of State, Memorandum, "Secretary's Staff Meeting, October 1, 1973: Summary of Decisions," October 4, 1973, (excerpt).

[Document 9](#): Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, "Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Carvajal, September 29, 1975.

[Document 10](#): Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Chilean Relations," (Kissinger – Pinochet), June 8, 1976.

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