

September 11 can't be monopolized

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WHEN the New York-based Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman witnessed the death and devastation wreaked upon that city a year ago, when he was confronted with the piteous sight of people wandering about in a daze, carrying pictures of loved ones who had disappeared without warning and begging strangers for information, when he found everyone around him saying that the world would never be the same again, he couldn't help thinking back to another September 11. Another Tuesday, as it happens.

The year was 1973. The city was Santiago, the capital of Chile. The target was the main symbol not of corporate potency but of people's power: La Moneda presidential palace. The perpetrators were not international outlaws but the chiefs of the Chilean armed forces.

When the republic's elected president refused to surrender and poured scorn on offers of a safe passage into exile, La Moneda was bombarded by the air force and besieged by the army. Salvador Allende died with a gun in his hand. He was, above all, a man of principle, and the exigency of September 11 compelled him to overcome his established distaste for violence.

Just a week earlier, at a rally marking the third anniversary of the presidential election that had finally catapulted him into power, nearly three quarters of a million supporters had filed past Allende.

"We will defend you" they had all chanted. But many had also raised a more practical slogan: "Give us weapons!"

Even if he had wished to accede to that demand, by that time Allende was in no position to do so. As a consequence, the rank and file of his Popular Unity coalition were all but defenceless against the uniformed terrorists. All manner of radical activists were singled out for special treatment: imprisonment, the worst imaginable

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

votes than his rivals and was favoured to win a congressional run-off, at an off-the-record White House briefing Kissinger voiced the fear that if he was allowed to form a government, Chile could become a "contagious example" that "would infect" its neighbours. As a former Kissinger aide later put it, "Henry thought Allende might lead an anti-US movement in Latin America more effectively than Fidel Castro, because Allende's was a democratic path to power."

Even before the election, a so-called Committee of 40, headed by Kissinger, had started pouring funds into Chile with the aim of

For Americans who find themselves in a contemplative mood today, here's something to chew upon: The mass murderers who took them by surprise a year ago did not come from Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cambodia, Vietnam, Angola or Cuba. Rather, they broke out of one of the menageries the US had sponsored as a bulwark against the communist 'menace'. Therein lies food for thought.

preventing Allende's accession to power. During the next three years, millions of dollars were allocated to Popular Unity's right-wing opponents and capitalist confederations as well as to the military, while the Chilean government was unable to squeeze the smallest loan out of US-controlled international financial institutions.

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However, an impediment existed in the shape of army chief General Carlos Prats, who happened to be a principled constitutionalist.

Prats resisted pressure for a long time, but was eventually forced to resign in late August 1973. (The following year, Prats and his wife were both shot dead in Argentina.) The army, which enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy, presented the name of his successor to Allende as a fait accompli. General Pinochet swore an oath of loyalty to the president just two weeks before unleashing a military operation against him.

A year after the coup, Jose Yglesias was trying to explain to US citizens the degree of terror experienced by Chileans on September 11, 1973. "When they speak of the bombing of La Moneda Palace," he said, "you should know that this act is the equivalent of bombing the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue during the work day."

Even though the Bushies these days enunciate the words 'regime change' as if they had invented the concept, in truth the US has been engaged in this practice for well over a century. Nor did the monstrous results of the Chilean version persuade it to pause for a policy reassessment. Nicaragua became the next major Latin American project, after the Sandinistas threw out the corrupt Somoza dynasty and introduced reforms geared towards the three things the US appears to fear most: universal literacy and health care, and a fairer distribution of wealth.

Well before that, in a different continent, there was another populist leader who had been promised exemplary retribution by Kissinger. Pakistan was

chosen for the privilege of enforced regime change on July 5, 1977, and its elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was murdered less than a year later. His nemesis, Gen Ziaul Haq, was in many ways a parody of Pinochet.

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Even if he had wished to accede to that demand, by that time Allende was in no position to do so. As a consequence, the rank and file of his Popular Unity coalition were all but defenceless against the uniformed terrorists. All manner of radical activists were singled out for special treatment: imprisonment, the worst imaginable forms of torture, arbitrary execution. A million Chileans went into exile during military rule. More than 3,000 were murdered.

Three thousand deaths — that's approximately the toll associated with the toppling of the Twin Towers. Another coincidence.

And how did the self-proclaimed beacon of democracy react to this outrage, this brutal cancellation of a popular verdict? Did the United States strongly urge the junta led by Augusto Pinochet to restore representative rule? Did it move the United Nations to impose sanctions against the government of usurpers? Did it seek to break off diplomatic relations?

Nothing of the sort. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger must have received the news from Santiago with a satisfied smirk. Another regime change successfully accomplished.

The US had been on Allende's case since well before the September 4, 1970, election that propelled him towards the presidency. "I don't see why," Kissinger had noted in June that year, "we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people." Allende, the leader of the Chilean Socialist Party, was not a communist — although as the Popular Unity candidate, he enjoyed the Communist Party's support. His ideological credentials posed a problem for the Nixon administration chiefly because the nationalization of vast economic assets owned by American corporations and a redistribution of wealth constituted a part of Popular Unity's platform.

After Allende garnered more

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By mid-September 1970, Nixon had formally instructed CIA director Richard Helms to thwart Allende's presidential bid. The favoured option — surprise, surprise — was a military coup. But the Chilean army under General Rene Schneider did not rise to the bait. So Schneider had to be taught a lesson, preferably in a manner that would also serve to destabilize Chile. In the week before the parliamentary run-off vote in October, there were no less than three attempts to abduct the commander-in-chief; the first two failed, while the third resulted in Schneider being fatally shot.

The second track was an effort to intimidate or buy off enough legislators to ensure that Allende lost the run-off. That too didn't work; his candidacy was approved by 153 votes to 35.

The third method — a joint venture between the US State Department, the CIA and corporations such as ITT, which had a vested interest in subverting the new government's socialistic agenda — was to make the economy "scream". This proved remarkably successful in the slightly longer run, with commercial activity being brought to a standstill time and again through the relatively unusual phenomenon of middle-class strikes by organizations such as the Confederation of Truck Owners.

Yet Popular Unity continued to poll well in municipal and congressional elections, and the US had no intention of relying on the ballot box to deliver the result it so desperately desired. The economic chaos it was so assiduously sowing was intended to create conditions conducive to a coup d'etat — and to this end considerable energy was devoted to cultivating the military brace

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During an extended visit to Chile in 1971, Fidel Castro had warned Allende that his determination to push through land reforms and nationalize the copper and telecommunications industries would be resisted tooth and nail — that a peaceful transition to socialism would prove all but impossible. "You are familiar," he pointed out in a parting speech to Chileans, "with how the privileged, exploiting class destroy the institutions they created ... to maintain their class domination: the laws, the constitution, the parliament — once these institutions are no longer of any use to them." Allende had responded: "Only by pumping me with bullets will they be able to keep me from fulfilling the programme of the people."

During his last stand at La Moneda, Allende was armed with an AK rifle that bore the inscription 'To my comrade-in-arms'. It had been a gift from Castro. In the thick of battle, he turned to his daughter Beatriz and said: "Tell Fidel I will do my duty."

Let us spare a thought, a moment or two of silence, for those who, like Allende, did their duty by the people. And for all the people, in Chile and elsewhere, who have suffered and died for trying to build a better and fairer world.

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