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Chile, The Coup And The Gringos

by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Translated by Fernán Ortiz de Zárate



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Colombian born Gabriel Garcia Marquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is considered to be the most important contemporary Latin American writer. Yet he has almost abandoned literature in recent months to devote himself to political writing and other political projects.

He became a member of the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal and has been working in Paris with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir on the preparation of a report on Chilean and Brazilian fascism. "Now that I am enjoying moral prestige, I must use it," Garcia Marquez declared. "I am not a political man, but in Latin America everyone has to be political." (This is this article's first appearance in English translation.)

At the end of 1969, three generals from the Pentagon had dinner with four Chilean military officials at a house in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The host was Colonel Gerardo Lopez Angulo, then Air Force attache of the Chilean mission to the U.S.A., and the Chilean guests were his colleagues from other armed forces.

The dinner was held in honor of the Director of the School of Aviation of Chile, General Carlos Toro Mazote, who had arrived the day before for a research visit. The seven military men ate fruit salad and barbeque veal in peace. They drank warmed blood-red wine from the distant southern country where bright birds were flying over the beach while Washington sank in the snow, and they spoke in English of the only thing which seemed to interest the Chilean people at that time: the Presidential elections of the next September.

At dessert, one of the generals from the Pentagon asked what the Chilean army would do if the candidate from the left, Salvador Allende, should be elected. The General Toro Mazote answered: "We'll take the Palace of the Moneda in half an hour, even if we have to burn it."

One of the guests was General Ernesto Baeza, present director of the Chilean Social Security, who was the one who directed the assault on the Presidential Palace in the recent coup and gave the order to burn it. Two of his assistants in those days became famous on the same day: General Augusto Pinochet, president of the military junta, and General Javier Palacios, who participated in the last battle against Salvador Allende.

The Air Force General Sergio Figueroa Gutierrez, present Minister of Public Works, sat at the table also, and a close friend of another member of the military junta, Air Force General Gustavo Leigh, who gave the order to fire rockets at the Presidential Palace. The last guest was the present Admiral Arturo Troncoso, now Naval Governor of Valparaiso, who made the bloody purge of the progressive officials of the Navy, and was the one who initiated the military revolt in the dawn of September 11.

That historical dinner was the first contact of the Pentagon with officials from the four Chilean armed forces. At other successive meetings, in Washington and in Santiago, they arrived at the final agreement that the Chilean military, more addicted to the spirit and the interests of the United States, would take power in case the Unidad Popular won the elections. They planned, in cold blood, a simple strategy of war, with no concern for the real conditions of Chile.

The plan was elaborated beforehand, not only as a consequence of the pressure of International Telegraph and Telephone (I.T.T.), but for more profound reasons of world politics. Its name was "Contingency Plan." The organization which set up the plan was the Defense Intelligence Agency of the Pentagon, but the

one in charge of its execution was the Naval Intelligence Agency, which centralizes and processes data from other agencies, including the CIA, under the overall political direction of the National Security Council.

It was appropriate that the project should be commissioned to the Navy and not the Army, because the Chilean coup was to coincide with "Operation Unitas," the joint exercise of Northamerican and Chilean fleets in the Pacific. These exercises were held in September, the month of the elections, and on the land and in the Chilean sky were all sorts of weapons of war and men trained in the art and science of death.

By this time, Henry Kissinger said in private to a group of Chileans: "I don't care and I don't know anything of the southern part of the world below the Pyrenees." The Contingency Plan was then finished to its last detail, and it is impossible to think that Kissinger wasn't informed about it. The same goes for President Nixon.

Chile is a narrow country 4,270 kilometres in length and 190 kilometers wide, with 10 million friendly people, two million of whom live in Santiago, the capital. The greatness of the country is not based on the quantity of its resources but in their uniqueness. The only serious product is copper, but it is the best in the world, and its volume of production is only just less than the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Wines are also produced, as good as the European, but only a few are exported because almost all is drunk by Chileans. The income per capita is one of the highest in Latin America, but almost one-half of the Gross National Product is shared by only 300,000 people.

In 1932, Chile was the first socialist republic in the continent and it tried to nationalize the copper and coal industries with the enthusiastic help of the workers. But this experience only lasted for 13 days. It has a minor earthquake on the average of every two days and a devastating major earthquake every three years. The less apocalyptic geologists consider Chile not to be a country of firm earth, but a ledge of the Andes in a foggy ocean, and the whole national territory, with its fields of nitrate and its tender people, is condemned to disappear in a cataclysm.

The Chilean people, in a way, are similar to the country. They are the kindest people of the continent, they love life and they know how to live, and even a bit more, but they have a dangerous tendency toward scepticism and intellectual speculation. "No Chilean Believes That Tomorrow is Tuesday," a Chilean once told me, and he didn't believe it either.

Nevertheless, even with this deep disbelief (or perhaps because of it), Chileans have achieved a high degree of natural civilization, a progressive political majority and a level of culture that are its best attributes. Of the three Nobel Prizes in Literature which Latin America has gotten, two were Chilean. One of them, Pablo Neruda, was the greatest poet of this century.

All of this Kissinger should have

known when he answered that he didn't know anything about the southern part of the world, because the government of the U.S. knew then the most hidden thoughts of the Chilean people. They had researched them in 1965, without the permission of Chile, in an inconceivable operation of social and political espionage: the "Camelot Plan."

It was a subtle investigation through very precise tests, applied to all social levels, to all professionals and officials, to the last corner of the country, to establish in a scientific way the degree of political development and the social tendencies of the Chilean people. In the questionnaire was the question which five years later was again heard by the Chilean military at their Washington dinner: "What would be the attitude, in case Communists took power?" After "Operation Camelot," the U.S. knew that Salvador Allende was going to be elected President of the Republic.

Chile was not chosen by chance for this test. The long history and the strength of its popular movement, the tenacity and the intelligence of its leaders and the economic and social conditions of the country allowed them to foresee its destiny. The analysis of "Operation Camelot" confirmed it. Chile was to be the second socialist republic in Latin America after Cuba. In a way, the purpose of the U.S. wasn't simply to stop the government of Salvador Allende to preserve the Northamerican investments. The main purpose was to repeat the most atrocious and fruitful experience which had ever been accomplished by imperialism in Latin America: Brazil.

On the fourth of December, 1970 as it had been predicted, the socialist doctor and mason Salvador Allende was elected President of the Republic. Nevertheless, the contingency plan wasn't applied. The most common explanation, and the funniest too, is: someone made a mistake in the Pentagon and asked for 200 visas for a supposed Navy band which was actually composed of specialists to disrupt governments. Among them were many admirals who didn't even know how to sign. The Chilean government discovered the plot and denied the visas.

This incident supposedly determined the delay of the adventure. But the truth is that the project was thoroughly evaluated. Other Northamerican agencies, especially the CIA and even the ambassador of the U.S. in Chile, Edward Korry, thought that the contingency plan was purely a military operation that did not take into account the real conditions of Chile.

In effect, the triumph of the Unidad Popular didn't cause the social panic expected by the Pentagon. On the contrary, the independence of the new government in international politics and its decisions on economic matters created an atmosphere of a social fiesta.

In the course of the first year they nationalized 47 businesses and more than one-half of the credit system. The agrarian reform expropriated and incorporated for the communal property 2,400,000 hectares of fertile lands. The inflationary process was moderated; they achieved full employment and salaries were increased 40%.

The prior government, presided over by the Christian Democrat, Eduardo Frei, had initiated a process of Chileanization of copper. The only thing it did was to buy 51% of the mines, and for the mine of El Teniente, they paid a greater amount than the business was worth. The Unidad Popular, however, recovered for the nation with one act of law all the copper mines exploited by the affiliates of the Northamerican companies, Anaconda and Kennecott. Without insurance, the govern-

ment calculated that the two companies, in 15 years, had made profits in excess of eight billion dollars.

The petit bourgeoisie and the intermediate social classes, two great forces which could have helped a military coup at that moment, started to enjoy this unforeseen advantage. And not at the expense of the working class as always occurred, but at the expense of the financial oligarchy and the foreign capital.

The armed forces, as a social group, have the same age, the same origin, and the same ambitions as the middle class, and they did not have the motive -- not even an excuse -- to help an exiled group of reactionary officials. Conscious of this reality, the Christian Democrats not only did not patronize the army conspiracy, but were overwhelmingly opposed to it, because they knew it was unpopular among their own supporters.

The conspiracy had a clear objective: to ruin by whatever means, the good health of the government by winning the two thirds of the Congress in the elections of March, 1973. With this proportion, it could decide the constitutional removal of the President of the Republic.

The Christian Democrats had a good interclass formation, with an authentic popular base in the working class of modern industry, among the small and middle-sized farmers and in the bourgeoisie and the middleclasses of the cities. The Unidad Popular represented the less favored working class, the agricultural worker and the lower middle class of the cities.

The Christian Democrats, allied with the National Party of the extreme right, controlled the Congress. The Unidad Popular controlled the executive power. The polarization of these two forces was to be, in fact, the polarization of the country. Curiously, the Catholic Eduardo Frei, who didn't believe in Marxism, was the one who was to gain more advantage in this class struggle by arousing and exciting the people; with the purpose of driving the government crazy, he pushed the country to the precipice of demoralization and economic disaster.

The economic blockade by the United States in revenge for the expropriation of its interests without repayment, and the internal sabotage by the bourgeoisie did the rest. In Chile, everything is produced -- from cars to toothpaste, but the industry has a false identity. Of the 160 most important businesses, 60% were controlled by foreign capital, and 80% of Chile's raw materials were imported. What's more, the country needed \$300 million per year to import consumer articles, and another \$450 million to pay external debts.

The credit of the socialist countries didn't remedy the fundamental need for spare parts because all Chilean industry, agriculture and transportation were sustained by Northamerican equipment. The Soviet Union had to buy wheat from Australia to send to Chile, because it didn't have the wheat itself, and through the Bank of Northern Europe, of Paris, it made several substantial loans in dollars. Cuba, as more of an exemplary gesture than decisive aid, sent a ship loaded with free sugar.

But the urgencies of Chile were overwhelming. The frivolous ladies of the bourgeoisie, with the pretext of rationing, and the excessive pretensions of the poor, went out to the public square making noise with their empty pots and pans. It wasn't unimportant. On the contrary, it was very significant, that this street spectacle of silver foxes and flowered hats happened the same evening that Fidel Castro finished a 30 day visit which had been an earthquake of progressive social agitation.

The Coup Gringos

Rosanna Marquez
in Ortiz de Zárate



President Salvador Allende understood then, and said, that the people had the government, but did not have the power. This most alarming sentence showed that Allende carried inside him a legal knot that was the seed of his own destruction: a man who fought until death defending justice, who would have left through the front door of the Moneda with dignity if the Congress had impeached him within the constitutional laws.

The Italian journalist and politico, Rossanna Rossanda, who visited Allende by that time found him old, tense and full of premonitions of doom, sitting on a yellow velvet sofa, where later his cadaver came to rest, full of bullet holes, with the face destroyed by rifle butts. At that point, even the most understanding sectors of the Christian Democrats were against him. "Including Tomic?", Rossanna asked him. "Everyone," answered Allende.

This was during the days preceding the election of March, 1973 -- the ones which governed his destiny -- which would confirm him if the Unidad Popular got 36% of the vote. In spite of wide inflation, of the terrible rationing and of the cacophonous concert of the pots and pans, it won 44%. It was such a spectacular and decisive victory, that when Allende was in his office with no more witnesses than his good friend and confidant Augusto Olivares, he had the door closed and by himself danced a "cueca."

For the Christian Democrats, the election was proof that the democratic process promoted by the Unidad Popular could not be contradicted by legal means. But it did not have the insight to foresee the consequences of its adventure. For them, it was an unpardonable case of historic irresponsibility.

For the United States, it was a warning much more important than the expropriated interests of its businesses. It was an inadmissible precedent for the peaceful progress of the peoples of the world -- but especially for those of France and Italy -- whose real conditions made possible an attempt similar to the Chilean experience. All the forces of internal and external reaction were concentrated in a compact block now.

However, the parties of the Unidad Popular, whose internal cracks were much deeper than they would admit, would not even agree on the analysis of the March vote. The government found itself without recourse, reclaimed from extreme isolation by the people.

Some in the party wished to take advantage of the evident radicalization of the masses, to make a decisive jump for social change, but most moderates were afraid of the spectre of a civil war and wished only to obtain a regressive agreement with the Christian Democrats. Now it can be seen with clarity that those contacts on the part of the opposition were not more than a distracting recourse to gain time.

The strike of the truck drivers was the detonating finale. Because of its fragmented geography, the Chilean economy is at the mercy of its land transportation. To paralyze it is to paralyze the country. This was very easy for the opposition to do, because the transportation union was the most affected by the lack of spare parts, and it was threatened as well by the government's disposition to nationalize the transport with Soviet equipment.

The strike endured until the coup without a single instance of weakness because it was financed from the outside with cash. "The CIA inundated the country with dollars to help the truck owner's strike, and that money was diverted into the black market," wrote Pablo Neruda to a friend in Europe. One week before

the coup, Chile ran out of oil, milk and bread.

In the last days of the Unidad Popular, with an unstable economy and the country on the verge of a civil war, the manipulations of the government and of the opposition centered on the hope to influence each to their liking -- the balance of power in the army. The last move was perfect. Forty-eight hours before the coup, the opposition had the superior leaders who supported Salvador Allende disqualified, and they ascended in their roles, one by one, in a series of masterful casting and checking moves, all those officers who had participated in the Washington dinner.

However, at that moment the political chess had escaped the will of their protagonists. Forced by an irreversible dialectic, they, themselves finished, conspiracy between imperialism and the reaction against a government by the people.

It was a terrible confrontation of classes that was provoked, a battle to the death of opposite interests whose final culmination had to be a social cataclysm without precedent in the history of America.

A military coup within the Chilean conditions could not be without cruelty. Allende knew it. "You don't play with fire," he told the Italian journalist Rossanna Rossanda. If anyone believed that in Chile a military coup would be like those in other countries of America, with a simple change of guards in the Moneda, they were making a mistake. "Here, a blood bath will happen. It will be another Indonesia." This certainty had a historical basis.

The Chilean armed forces, contrary to what we are made to believe, have intervened in politics each time they have seen their class interests menaced, and they have done it with a tremendous repressive ferocity. The two constitutions that the country has had in a century have been imposed by weapons, and the recent military coup was the sixth attempt in the last 50 years.

The Chilean Army was born in the terrible body to body war against the Araucan Indians which lasted 300 years. One of its precursors, speaking vaingloriously in 1620, said he had killed with his own hands, more than 2,000 people in a single action.

Joaquin Edwards Bello tells in his chronicals that during a typhus epidemic the army took people out of their beds and killed them with a poison bath to stop the plague. During a civil war of seven months in 1891, 10,000 people were killed in one battle. Peruvians assure us that during the occupation of Lima in the war of the Pacific the Chilean military sacked the library of Don Ricardo Palma. They did not use the books to read them, but to clean their asses.

The popular movements have been repressed with even more brutality. After the earthquake in Valparaiso in 1906, the Navy slaughtered 8,000 dockworkers. In Iquique at the beginning of the century, a demonstration of strikers seeking refuge in a municipal theater, to escape the troops, were machine-gunned, leaving 2,000 dead.

On April 2, 1957, the army repressed a civil demonstration in the commercial center of Santiago for which the number of victims was never established, because the government ripped off the bodies to bury them secretly.

During a strike in the mines of El Salvador under the government of Eduardo Frei, a military patrol dispersed a demonstration by shooting and killing six people, among them several children and a pregnant woman. The comandante of the square was an obscure 52-year-old general, father of five children, professor of geography and author of several

military books: Augusto Pinochet.

The myth of the legality and docility of the butcherous Chilean Army has been invented in the interest of the Chilean bourgeoisie. The Unidad Popular kept the army with the hope of changing, in its favor, the class composition of the high-ranking officers.

But Salvador Allende felt more secure among the "carabineros," an armed body from the people and the farmers, that was under the direct mandate of the President of the Republic. Only the oldest officials of the "carabineros" helped the coup. The young officials entrenched themselves at the school of Sub-Officials of Santiago and they resisted for four days, until they were annihilated from the air with bombs of war.

That was the most well-known battle of the secret fight that happened inside the quarters on the eve of the coup. The conspirators assassinated the officials who refused to follow them. Entire regiments were outraged and refused orders. In Santiago as well as in the provinces, they were repressed without clemency and their loyal leaders were executed in order to break out the troops. The comandante of the destroyers of Vina del Mar, Colonel Cantuarias, was machine-gunned by his assistant.

The existing government has made us believe that many of those loyal soldiers were victims of the popular resistance. Time will pass before the real proportions of that internal butchery will be known, because the cadavers were taken out of the quarters in garbage trucks and buried secretly.

Numerous foreign agents participated in the drama. The bombardment of the Moneda, whose technical precision amazed the experts, was done by a group of North American aero acrobats who had entered under the screen of Operation Unitas to offer a spectacle of a flying circus the following 18th of September, day of national independence. Numerous secret police from neighboring governments infiltrated at the Bolivian border, remaining hidden until the day of the coup, and promoted a persecution to death against 7,000 political refugees from other Latin American countries.

Brazil, homeland of the oldest guerrillas, was in charge of this service, having promoted, two years before the coup, the reactionary coup in Bolivia which left Chile without substantial help. Brazil facilitated the infiltration of every item necessary for the subversion. Some of the loans which had been made from the U.S. to Brazil were secretly transferred to Bolivia in order to finance the subversion in Chile.

In 1972, the General William Westmoreland went secretly to La Paz. The aim of the trip has not been revealed. It doesn't seem accidental, nevertheless, that a while ago after that hushed-up visit, the movement of troops and war materials began at the Bolivian-Chilean border. This gave to the Chilean military another opportunity to get together its internal position, to displace personnel and to promote a hierarchy favorable to their own imminent coup.

Finally, on the 11th of September, while Operation Unitas began prematurely, the original plan of the Washington dinner was executed. Three years later than expected -- not as a conventional coup, but as a devastating operation of war.

It had to be like this, because it wasn't simply making a government fall. It had to establish the eerie darkness similar to Brazil with its terrible terror machines of torture and death, until not a clue of the political and social conditions which made the Unidad Popular possible were left in Chile. Four months after the coup, the count showed almost 20,000 people assassinated.

Thirty thousand were political prisoners submitted to savage torture, 25,000 students were expelled and more than 200,000 licensed working men were fired. However, the hardest stage was not yet finished.

At the hour of the final battle, with the country at the mercy of unchained forces of subversion, Salvador Allende held fast to the law. A natural enemy of violence and a passionate revolutionary, the most dramatic contradiction of his life had heightened.

He believed he had resolved it with the hypothesis that the Chilean condition would permit a peaceful evolution toward socialism within the bourgeois laws. The experience taught him too late, that you can't change a system with the government if you don't have the power.

This late confirmation had to be the force that pushed him to resist until death, in the flaming ruins of a house which wasn't even his, a shadowy mansion constructed by an Italian architect to be a mint, but ended up being the refuge of a powerless President. He resisted for six hours with a machine gun presented to him by Fidel Castro.

It was the first firearm that Salvador Allende ever shot. The journalist, Augusto Olivares, who remained at his side until the end, was wounded several times and bled to death on the way to the public hospital.

Towards four in the afternoon, general Javier Palacios, his assistant, Capitan Gallardo, and a group of officials were able to climb to the second floor of the palace. There, among the false Louis XV sofas, and the Chinese dragon vessels and the pictures by Rugendas in the red room, Salvador Allende was waiting for them. Wearing a helmet on his head, in his shirtsleeves, without a tie, and with his clothes dirtied by blood. Holding the machine gun in his hand.

Allende knew General Palacios well. Only a few days before, he told Augusto Olivares that this was a dangerous man who maintained close contacts with the United States Embassy. As soon as he saw Palacios appear in the stairway, Allende shouted at him, "Traitor!" and wounded him in the hand.

Allende died in an exchange of bullets with that patrol. Soon all the officials in a rite of caste, shot into the body. At the end, a sub-official destroyed his face with a rifle butt. The photo exists; it was taken by the photographer Juan Enrique Lira, of the newspaper El Mercurio. He was the only one allowed to photograph the cadaver. It was so disfigured that his wife, Hortensia Allende, was only shown his body in his coffin. She was not permitted to uncover his face.

Salvador Allende was 64 years old last July and he was the perfect Leo: tenacious, decided, and unpredictable. "Only Allende knew what Allende thought," one of his ministers told me. He loved life, loved flowers and dogs, and he was a bit old fashioned in his gallantry with perfumed notes and discreet meetings.

His major virtue was the consequence, but fate gave him the unique and tragic greatness to die defending by the gun, the anachronistic fools of the bourgeois right; defending a Supreme Court of Justice which repudiated him and tried to legitimize his assassins; defending a miserable Congress that had declared him illegitimate, but which had complacently succumbed before the usurpers; will; defending the freedom of the opposition party which had sold its soul to fascism; defending all the moth-eaten paraphernalia of a shitty system that he proposed to eliminate without shooting a bullet.

The drama happened in Chile, at the expense of the Chileans, but it must be written in history as something that happened to all of us without remedy -- to all humanity of this time -- and that will remain in our lives forever.