

@CHAPTER = CHILE

The Bush administration, with a relatively new ambassador in Santiago, new senior officials and a new Chile desk officer at the State Department, and new U.N. representatives, has nonetheless pursued a Chile policy unchanged from that of the second Reagan administration. Chile's transition to open elections after the October 5, 1988 plebiscite has been supported, just as it was during the second Reagan term; the United States has continued to pursue a resolution of the Orlando Letelier-Ronni Moffitt assassination case, for which two high-level Chilean secret-police officials were indicted by a U.S. grand jury in 1978; and officials at the U.S. embassy continued to meet with a range of opposition figures and human rights advocates. Unfortunately, at the United Nations in December 1989, the U.S. abstained on a widely supported resolution critical of ongoing human rights abuses in Chile; such abstentions also had been common in the later Reagan years, reflecting the Reagan administration's refusal to apply international standards consistently at the U.N.

The Bush administration's policy has contained a single surprise, and even this was consistent with Reagan policy. Unbeknownst to either the Chilean people or the U.S. Congress, the Bush administration consummated a deal to sell 15 transport helicopters to the Chilean army -- a deal made secretly by the Reagan administration in 1987, at a time when the plebiscite's date had not even been determined and when the opposition was still fragmented; 1987 was a year in which, for the first time since the mid-70s, people disappeared in Chile, and a year in which members of the opposition were murdered, imprisoned, tortured and threatened with death. The helicopter deal technically did not have to be cleared with Congress, because the helicopters were not outfitted for offensive use and were of a type not included on the "munitions list" of arms covered by human-rights conditions. But members of Congress concerned with human rights were stunned nevertheless at hearing of the sale after it became public knowledge in Chile in August 1989. They considered the timing of the sale poor, the timing of the original deal very unfortunate, and the secretiveness of the maneuver underhanded.

The Chilean military has fulfilled its constitutional commitment to allow open elections for president and parliament, in light of General Augusto Pinochet's defeat in the presidential plebiscite of October 1988, and the elections took place without incident on December 14, 1989, with the democratic opposition handily winning the presidency and a majority in the parliament. Partially due to unfair advantages awarded to the regime under the peculiar "binomial" electoral system, however, the democratic coalition did not win the two-thirds majority of parliament that it needed to change regressive laws left in place by the regime, including curbs on expression and a lack of civilian authority over military commanders. U.S. embassy and State Department officials consistently endorsed the political process underway in Chile during the past year, and in their enthusiasm were reluctant to criticize the failings of the electoral system or ongoing human rights abuses. While the year saw a consolidation of plans to transfer the Chilean government to elected representatives, a more open climate for the press, and increased tolerance of political-party activity, there was also intimidation of opposition campaign workers, and a leftist politician was assassinated, while two national labor leaders were held in internal exile for most of the year and violent threats, house raids, abductions and physical attacks continued. These negative aspects of the situation did not draw comment from the State Department.

The helicopter sale, however, put Congress on its guard, and the 1990 foreign aid appropriations bill contains language which would permit a small amount of International Military Education and Training funds to go to the Chilean

military after a civilian government is installed in March 1990, only on condition that the new Chilean president requests such aid, that human rights are being respected in Chile, and that the new government is cooperating with U.S. efforts to resolve the Letelier-Moffitt case through a bilateral commission.

The human rights issue that will be central in Chile next year -- the question of accountability for past human rights abuses -- is one on which the Reagan administration had a poor track record elsewhere in Latin America; in this the Bush administration should chart a new course for itself. The new Chilean government, led by Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin, will need substantial international support in an effort to achieve truth and justice regarding the past sixteen years; the armed forces will be evaluating the balance of civilian versus military power in the new era and will be reluctant to be held accountable, especially for the mass killings and disappearances of the regime's early years. The United States could play a valuable role if the Bush administration were consistently willing to show positive interest in the pursuit of truth and justice in Chile, as this process will be essential to the strengthening of civilian authority and the rule of law.