

U.S. declassifies historic Nixon intelligence reports on 1973 Chile coup

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Chilean Carabineros surround Chile's La Moneda Presidential Palace on Sept. 11, 1973. Bound by law to be the Presidential Guard, one hour later they betrayed Constitutional President Salvador Allende by switching sides and joining the coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Photo: Horacio Villalobos/Corbis via Getty Images

The U.S. State Department has released two formerly top-secret documents that shed light on the information President Richard Nixon received as the 1973 coup d'état unfolded in Chile.

Why it matters: The records show the Nixon Administration's view — and possible support — of events in Santiago de Chile that led to the downfall of the democratically elected government of Socialist President Salvador Allende for a brutal dictatorship.

Details: The president's daily briefs from the CIA released by U.S. Ambassador to Chile Bernardette Meehan last week show Nixon receiving information on the strength of the coup.

- Three days before the coup, the president's briefing discussed the "possibility of an early military coup attempt," and Allende's belief that the situation is "serious and requires cautious handling, and that some tactical political retreats may be in order. "
- "He is worried about the sustained opposition pressures against him and, especially, about the intentions of the military."
- On the day of the Sept. 11th coup, the briefing mentions "plans by navy officers to trigger military action against the Allende government."

Zoom out: Several documents have been declassified by the U.S. in recent years that hint at Washington's role in a coup that installed the brutal dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

Before the coup, then-President Nixon had given direct orders to CIA Director Richard Helms to "save Chile" by instigating a military coup to oust Allende, the National Security Archive showed.

Between the lines: Chile was one of several countries the U.S. saw as crucial during the Cold War to halt the spread of leftist governments as the U.S. was embattled in the Vietnam War.

The U.S. worked to prevent and overthrow leftist governments, even if it meant installing right-wing dictatorships during this period.

What they're saying: "The U.S. Government completed this declassification review in response to a request from the Government of Chile and to allow for a deeper understanding of our shared history," the U.S. State Department said of the latest declassification.

The declassification of the documents "promotes the search for truth and reinforces the commitment of our countries to our democratic values," Chile's undersecretary of Foreign Affairs of Gabriel Boric's government, Gloria de la Fuente, said in a statement.

The intrigue: A delegation of Hispanic U.S. House members recently visited Chile ahead of the 50th anniversary of the coup that installed Pinochet.

- The delegation included U.S. Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), Joaquin Castro (D-Texas) and Maxwell Frost (D-Fla.).
- They visited the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago, Chile. It pays homage to the victims of Pinochet.

What's next: Chile is pressing the U.S. to declassify more documents related to the coup.