



Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes

ISSN: 0826-3663 (Print) 2333-1461 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rclc20>

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To cite this article: Gregory Weeks (2018) Civilian inattention and democratization: the Chilean military and political transition in the 1930s, *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes*, 43:1, 1-17, DOI: [10.1080/08263663.2018.1426475](https://doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2018.1426475)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2018.1426475>



Published online: 16 Feb 2018.



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Civilian inattention and democratization: the Chilean military and political transition in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

The Chilean political transition that took place in 1932 is commonly viewed as positive for civil-military relations. This article argues that the very means used to restore stable civilian rule in Chile in the 1930s also contributed to the slow decay of civil-military relations, especially with the army. The conceptual lesson for the contemporary period is that civilian control entails much more than avoiding coups or rebellion in the short term. Civil-military institutions and civilian leadership matter for democracy. Although civilian strategies proved highly effective in the short term, the failure to strengthen civil-military institutions ultimately carried with it a high cost in the longer term. Compounded over years, civilian inattention can lead to estrangement, which in turn can gradually erode civilian supremacy and, by extension, democracy itself.

RESUMEN

La transición política Chilena que tuvo lugar en 1932, usualmente es concebida como una influencia positiva en las relaciones civiles-militares. Este artículo argumenta que las medidas utilizadas para restaurar el dominio civil en Chile durante la década de 1930 también contribuyeron al paulatino deterioro de las relaciones civiles-militares, especialmente con el ejército. En el periodo contemporáneo, la lección conceptual es que el control civil incluye mucho más que eludir a corto plazo golpes de estado o rebeliones. Las instituciones civiles-militares y el liderazgo civil son importantes para la democracia. Aunque las estrategias civiles han comprobado ser altamente efectivas en el corto plazo, la falta de fortalecimiento de instituciones civiles-militares genera un alto costo a largo plazo. Formadas durante años, las intenciones civiles pueden llevar a un distanciamiento, el cual puede mermar gradualmente la supremacía civil y, por consecuencia, la democracia en sí misma.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 June 2015
Accepted 5 December 2017

KEYWORDS

Chile; civil-military relations; politics; democratization

This is a people who love liberty and whose special psychology pushes them, constantly, toward the defense of juridical institutions and toward respect for the law and the rights consecrated within it [...] it is impossible to install a dictatorship in this country. (Senado de Chile 1948, 357)

When former President Arturo Alessandri spoke these words, he had been out of office for a decade. From his memoirs, it is clear that he felt pleased with his political legacies, one of which was a military that interfered in political affairs far less than it had in the

tumultuous 1920s and early 1930s. The transition from military to civilian rule that took place in 1932 seemed remarkably smooth and successful. One goal of this article is to explain why, given what seemed a propitious beginning, the military became estranged from civilian policy makers. A second goal is to use an historical case to contribute to a greater understanding of the long-term civil-military effects of political transitions, with particular attention paid to the institutional erosion that can take place when the military leaves power in a position of weakness.

This article utilizes Congressional transcripts, six newspapers intended to reflect a broad political spectrum, memoirs, and secondary sources.¹ It will argue that the very means used to restore stable civilian rule in Chile in the 1930s also contributed to the slow decay of civil-military relations, especially with the army. In particular, by the 1960s the almost total lack of civil-military engagement meant that crises could no longer be resolved within existing political institutions. In a comparative historical context, this can shed light on the potential consequences of civilian choices during the process of democratization.

In December 1932, Chileans finally saw the end of an eight-year period of civil-military discord and military rule. By then, the armed forces were disgraced and lacked any significant political support. From 1932 to 1973, despite several examples of saber rattling, Chile would elect presidents every six years; and not only did the military not take over the government, but several uprisings were also quickly defeated and failed to gain widespread support. As early as the end of Alessandri's term (1938), there was a remarkable consensus that Chilean democracy would never meet the ignominious ends suffered by its neighbors, such as the coups and political-military coalitions in pre-Peronist Argentina, military revolt and dictatorship in Bolivia, Brazil's *Estado Novo* (1937–1945), or the violent conflict between *Apristas* and the army in Peru.

Political transition and the military

One of the most enduring paradigms to come from the large literature on political transitions emphasizes particular “modes” or “paths” of democratization.² The essential argument is that when authoritarian rule gives way to electoral democracy, the initial conditions will strongly influence the future of democracy. Most importantly, these initial conditions determine the relative bargaining strength of political actors (usually referring to military leaders and civilian opposition), but they also affect the impunity of authoritarian abuse of human rights, military autonomy, and popular legitimacy of the new government.

This path dependence approach says little about how the newly elected civilian leaders craft their relationship with the armed forces. There is no consensus in the literature on Latin American civil-military relations either. On the hand, perhaps a lack of civilian knowledge means there is no effective control over the military (Fitch 1998). On the other, if the military ceases to be an immediate threat to democracy, then perhaps civilian expertise is not so essential (Pion-Berlin 2005). As Bruneau and Mattei argue, “While there is still concern in many of the newer democracies with achieving democratic civilian control over the armed forces, there is generally little awareness of the institutions necessary to achieve and exercise this control” (Bruneau and Matei 2008, 924).

Part of the conceptual problem is that the notions of “civilian control” or “civilian supremacy” suffer from a conceptual dichotomy of “control” versus “coup” (Croissant et al. 2010). If the armed forces do not attempt to take over the political system over a period of years, then civilian control is assumed to hold. The literature tends also to focus on recent cases, rather than examining historical examples that can provide more insight into the long-term consequences of transition dynamics.

The Chilean transition in the 1930s fits the description of what has been called “imposition”, “collapse”, “society-led regime termination”, or “reform through rupture” (Stepan 1986; Karl 1990; Linz and Stepan 1996; Munck and Leff 1997). Regardless of the precise label, from this “mode of transition” perspective, there is a common central conclusion: that these transitions involve some sort of disintegration of the authoritarian regime with a concomitant discrediting of the military institution and a marked rise in popular pressure for its replacement by a civilian government. The anti-authoritarian opposition thus has an opportunity to step into the political vacuum, and, although the new government will likely face periodic short-term conflict from disgruntled military factions, the long-term prognosis for democracy is quite good.

This article asserts that the mode of transition matters for the future of democracy, but in an unanticipated manner. As Felipe Agüero points out, “Institutional settings and resources provide the constraints but also the opportunities, and it is up to the actors involved to use, exploit, or avoid them” (Agüero 2001, 198). When a military government leaves power in the context of collapse, there is a unique opportunity for civilians (unavailable when such a government exits with its political influence intact) to establish civilian supremacy, at least in the short term, and in the Latin American cases this generally occurs through strong presidential rule. In the longer term, however, the failure to build effective civil-military institutions leaves the door to military intervention, always open a crack by dint of history, that much easier to shove open.³ More attention, therefore, must be paid to the strategies the new civilian governments employ, even when initial conditions seem to favor civilian supremacy over the armed forces.

The Chilean context

In Chile during the 1930s, civilian strategies for dealing with the military were initiated by Alessandri when he took office in December 1932, and by the time Pedro Aguirre Cerda won the next election in 1938, there was a coherent framework for civil-military relations in place. At its core was the belief that the armed forces would refrain from political meddling if the officer corps was carefully scrutinized and if the “good” officers were left to their own devices. As a result, politicians never saw the need to build relationships through the Ministry of Defense, to utilize Congress as a vehicle for oversight, or even to consult senior officers about national defense and the development of military doctrine that would be most propitious for both defense and democracy. Instead, the civilian consensus was that military rule in Chile had ended forever.

The most prominent declaration of optimism came from former president Alessandri in 1948, who announced that democracy would last forever. His sentiments were repeated throughout the years before the 1973 coup. Federico Gil published a landmark book on

Chilean politics in 1966 and dedicated only a few paragraphs to the role of the military, concluding that “officers do not appear to be as strongly nationalistic as their counterparts in other Latin American countries” (Gil 1966, 296). Claude Bowers, US ambassador to Chile from 1939 until 1953, barely mentions the military in his memoirs, and writes that the country enjoys “political maturity and judgment, together with Chilean self-control and sense of humor, that restrain the defeated from going out into the streets in an attempt to take over by force” (Bowers 1958, 43). The overall message could not be clearer: Chile would never again suffer military intervention.

This article does not offer the simplistic notion that greater attention to strengthening civil-military institutions would have served to avoid the political breakdown that began in the late 1960s and culminated with the 1973 overthrow of President Salvador Allende. Yet it is clear that over the decades the lack of attention paid to those institutions meant military autonomy was taken for granted, lines of communication were sporadic and often absent, and unpredictability – often combined with mutual distrust – was the norm. As Chile underwent seismic socio-economic transformations, the armed forces felt isolated and threatened, and became increasingly suspicious of what they considered political demagoguery and acquiescence to a Moscow-controlled Left. Their concerns, they felt, were not taken seriously by the majority of civilian politicians.

In this context, it is important to note that the careers of three of the four military Commanders in Chief involved in the 1973 overthrow of President Salvador Allende were formed during Alessandri’s administration. Army General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte was in the academy in 1933–1937, Navy Admiral José Toribio Merino in 1931–1936, and National Police (*Carabineros*) General César Mendoza in 1937–1941. The exception was Air Force General Gustavo Leigh Guzmán, who entered in 1940. As Frederick Nunn notes, “their [soldiers’] ideas on civilian politics and democracy are affected by those of the military generation to which they belong and the epoch in which they were career oriented and reached maturity” (Nunn 1976, 305).

The rise and fall of the “honorable mission”

From the late nineteenth century until the 1920s, the Chilean political elite fought over the relative powers of the president and Congress.⁴ In 1891, civil war erupted, and the navy, allied with Congress, defeated the army and the president. President José Manuel Balmaceda committed suicide, and for over 30 years the political system would be characterized by a presidential system, with extensive congressional control over the executive. The armed forces became increasingly discontent, believing (along with many workers, miners, parts of the middle class, and even sectors of the oligarchy) that the system was inherently incapable of effectively addressing Chile’s economic problems. By the 1920 presidential elections, the military had become highly disillusioned with government manipulation (including a false claim of an imminent Peruvian invasion, with mobilization of troops) and the winner, Arturo Alessandri, became the symbol of political change.

Alessandri utilized the already politicized army for his own purposes and in the process legitimized the army’s self-image as the arbiter of national politics. Then, in an

attempt to ensure senate seats for Liberal candidates in 1924, he sent officers to supervise polling stations (Nunn 1970, 47). The opposition complained of officers meddling with ballot boxes. Meanwhile, a number of senior officers were plotting to overthrow Alessandri and thereby end the executive-legislative battle that had been raging for four years. Increasingly, both army and navy officers doubted whether civilian regimes were capable of carrying forward the necessary political reforms and the end of the executive-legislative gridlock. They were also skeptical about whether civilians were capable of bringing the country out of the economic downturn that had been persistent since the end of World War I.

The result was a list of demands presented to Alessandri in 1924 by a *junta* of high-ranking officers, insisting that he take action on a number of issues, including military salaries and pensions. But even after Alessandri and Congress fully complied, the *junta* remained intact and the president soon resigned (Loveman 2001, 180–1). Thus began a period of civil-military instability. Initially, the military believed it was fulfilling an “honorable mission”, especially in terms of writing a new constitution and eliminating what was viewed as the excesses of the congressional era in Chile. Before long, however, the military became deeply splintered with both inter- and intra-service disputes, while charismatic army officers such as Carlos Ibáñez and Marmaduke Grove led their own military cliques. The depth of the problems were revealed in a 1931 naval revolt and a short-lived “Socialist Republic”. Increasingly, even previous supporters viewed the political maneuvering with alarm, and faith in the military’s ability to guide the country was shattered.

The “transition” to civilian rule was thus short. In a period of three months, between September and December 1932, “civilista” officers in all three branches guaranteed presidential elections (won again by Alessandri), prevented Ibáñez from returning to the country, and inaugurated Alessandri as the new president of Chile. Only in October was the United States prepared to offer diplomatic recognition, which it had withheld for months. As US Ambassador William Culbertson explained, “it would be too much to say that permanent political stability has returned to Chile”, but that “I believe that the time has arrived when we can with dignity and with profit renew our official relations with the Moneda” (Foreign Relations of the United States 1932, 504).

The return of Alessandri and civilian rule

Alessandri took office on 23 December 1932. The new president had several strategies to ensure an end to military intervention and used all of them immediately. Very few of them, however, involved institutional reform. Instead, they were short-term actions calculated to bend the military to his will. As a result, over the long term their positive effects were diminished.

First, he strengthened the “Milicia Republicana”, a Right-wing paramilitary group that had emerged in response to the Socialist Republic. Second, he reshuffled the high command in the army and demanded resignations. Third, he appointed an experienced civilian Defense Minister who he trusted, whose job was simply to avoid military intervention. Fourth, he cut the military’s budget and controlled it to a greater extent than his predecessors. Fifth, he centralized political power and often used constitutionally-granted extraordinary powers as a way to strike at his political enemies, which also

had the effect of consolidating presidential rule. At times, this would also entail using army troops to put down strikes, labor disputes or other perceived threats to order. Although the army was used in this manner less than in many other South American countries, these missions would contribute to the army's self-identification as saviors in times of crisis. Each of these factors will be discussed in turn.

Milicia Republicana

The *Milicia Republicana* was created in 1932 as a private militia to prevent a Communist take-over in the tumultuous period of the Socialist Republic (Nunn 1976, 228). The Militia was consciously intended to be a replacement for formal institutions. Originally secret, it soon became conspicuously public. Conservatives, Liberals, and many Radicals viewed it both as a counter to the interventionist tendencies of the Chilean army and a bulwark against socialism and communism. Its members and financial backers included Alessandri supporters, and when he took office he allowed it to exist another four years to protect himself from a military coup. The army detested it, but was in no position to force its dissolution. Interestingly, the more conservative navy supported it, believing that it would protect "the nation's institutions" as it favored the conservative status quo (Nunn 1976, 230). Numerous retired naval officers joined its ranks.

Conservatives believed that Chile had lost "the concept of hierarchy, of the natural subordination of the inferior to the superior", which had created the problem of "Communist and Socialist elements, with a general lack of morality" (*El Diario Ilustrado* 1933). As a result, the *Milicia* was a welcome barrier to any further attempts by factions of the army to impose socialism. *El Mercurio* echoed that sentiment, blaming the army's dissatisfaction on Ibañistas, who used the press to stir up trouble (*El Mercurio* 1934).⁵ Through *La Opinión* (1933), the Left attacked the *Milicia* as "an armed faction whose object is to maintain these criminal economic and social injustices of this individualistic regime".

The government armed the *Milicia*, using weapons originally intended for the army. Furthermore, in May 1933 it received legal protection, as an appellate court ruled that it did not represent a "substitute" to the armed forces, which would have been unconstitutional (Maldonado Prieto 1988b). For several more years, the *Milicia* would undertake public marches (one in 1934 included 40,000 members) under the umbrella of both legal and political approbation.

In the short term, the *Milicia* functioned precisely according to Alessandri's plans, as, given its significant political support, it sent a strong anti-interventionist message and even stripped the army of funds. Remembering a *Milicia* parade in July 1933, he expressed satisfaction that there was an "effective civic force to defend the constitution, law, and government stability" (Alessandri 1967, 46). Over the longer term, however, it was a source of army resentment regarding civilian political machinations. In 1933, the *Milicia* was allowed to march directly after the army in the annual military parade, and future army Commander in Chief Carlos Prats González (a staunch civilianist who was later murdered for opposing the 1973 coup and dictatorship), who was present at the time, wrote in his memoirs of the "impotent discontent" in the ranks (Prats González 1985, 70). Officers who came of age during that period learned that politicians viewed them with disdain, and Prats would later find himself in the minority in the defense of civilian rule.

Personnel changes

Alessandri immediately demanded the resignations of all but one army general, noting that, in one fell swoop, he saved the country a considerable amount of money as he replaced relatively few (Alessandri 1967, 9). The military simply had no leverage to resist as he promoted his favorite officers to General. His choice as army Commander in Chief was General Pedro Vignola, who had advocated a return to civilian rule as it became clear that the military's public image was deteriorating badly. Vignola, however, angered the president in December 1933 by publicly announcing that the *Milicia Republicana* was a threat to the army and should be "combated and resisted by all possible means" (quoted in Alexander 1977, 589). Alessandri called in Vignola, who then submitted his resignation.

Alessandri chose an interim replacement, Marcial Urrutia, but in March 1934 named General Oscar Novoa as the new army Commander in Chief, which was a key moment for Chilean civil-military relations. Novoa had risen through the ranks as a strictly professional, non-controversial, and non-political soldier who disdained the political machinations of the 1920s, but remained silent due to his sense of discipline (Nunn 1976, 226–7). He has been credited as rebuilding a splintered, factional, and coup-prone army (Loveman 2001, 202). He and Alessandri maintained a close relationship, and Novoa was in constant contact with the president whenever discontent within the ranks appeared.

Novoa actively used his power to force the retirement of officers he considered too politicized, and, as long as the army remained out of the spotlight, Alessandri gave Novoa a free hand to do as he deemed fit. Novoa did not retire from active duty until 20 December 1938, so almost simultaneously both Alessandri and his army Commander in Chief left their positions, their work accomplished. *El Mercurio* lauded Novoa, especially for his tendency to be frank, "which has created a favorable impression on the public" (*El Mercurio* 1933a). The anti-Alessandri press, such as *Hoy*, called for Novoa's resignation, arguing that he had forced out the "most select and prepared" of the army's officer corps for personal reasons, and that he was only Commander in Chief because 10 more qualified and more senior generals had been fired (*Hoy* 1936b).

In general, the Alessandri administration believed that once the rotted core of socialist and Communist sympathizers was purged from the military ranks, the remaining officer corps would not constitute a threat. Certain fascist leanings among officers – especially reflecting admiration for the Spanish nationalists but also for the Nazi Party – were not viewed as a problem. Certainly, such sentiment was not uncommon in Chile at the time both in civilian and military circles; a Chilean general (Francisco Javier Díaz Valderrama) organized the first Nazi organization in 1932 (Fariás 2000, 369). Officers who remained loyal to Novoa and Alessandri were rewarded.

New Defense Ministry

The Defense Ministry was created by decree in December 1932, and marks the most important civil-military institutional reform (Díaz 1997).⁶ Before then, defense functions were channeled through cabinet ministers: the Minister of War (for the army) and the Minister of the Navy. The creation of the air force – which entailed a new Subsecretary of Aviation – as well as the desire to exert greater control over the

military as a whole prompted Alessandri to create an institution that would act as an umbrella over all three branches, with a Defense Minister and three sub-secretaries.⁷

Despite his lack of experience in defense issues, the choice of Emilio Bello Codesido as Defense Minister was universally accepted by virtue of his long, distinguished, and relatively controversy-free career in public service. In *El Mercurio*, he was touted as someone who would help forge policies to give the armed forces the “prestige that they ought to have” (*El Mercurio* 1932). Even Alessandri’s harshest critics lauded the choice (Donoso 1952). But Bello also possessed two qualities that encouraged military autonomy. First, as a loyal Balmacedista, he was a firm believer in the virtues of the presidential system of government and suspicious of narrow partisan interests taking precedence in Congress. Civil-military relations were therefore best kept within the executive branch without congressional interference. Second, he also believed that the armed forces were essentially loyal, that most of their interventions in the 1920s were intended to rid the country of parliamentary abuse, and that once purged of Leftist elements they were restored to their previous prestige and, as he put it, “the affection of the people [*el cariño del pueblo*]” (Bello Codesido 1954, 229).

That being the case, he was willing to allow General Novoa all the leeway he wanted to rebuild the army (because, as Novoa would have been aware, the attitude of *el pueblo* was in fact very much in doubt). His hands-off approach worked well in the 1930s, when senior officers were leery of politicization, but also set a precedent for a weak ministry. It is a clear example of what Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2007) have called “attention deficit”, whereby civilians learn little about defense issues given other pressing priorities. Given the historical politicization of the armed forces, civilian leaders tend to focus on coup avoidance rather than articulating defense policy.

Bello’s main priority was to purge “overly political” officers and to ensure that politicization did not take place again. To this effect, he even signed an order in 1933 changing the oath that all Chilean soldiers were required to take. Whereas past oaths made no reference to politics, the new one did by including the phrase “I will not meddle in matters of political character in anything outside my professional duties” (Estado Mayor General del Ejército 1985, 341).⁸ Aside from admonitions about non-intervention, he did not provide direction for the armed forces in terms of doctrine, threat perception, equipment, or other essential defense matters. The precedent would be followed until the Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende (1970–1973). The president would leave defense policy to the Defense Minister, who, in turn, would allow Commanders in Chief to do what they wished as long as the troops remained quiet. A 1934 Senate summary noted that “The Ministry of Defense still lacks an organization capable of providing direction in the different branches of the armed forces” (Senado de Chile. 1934, 34).

Bello remained as Defense Minister for Alessandri’s entire term, a significant sign of stability in a country with a recent history of revolving-door ministries. During his 1920–1924 tenure in office, Alessandri had 17 different cabinets, and in the post of Guerra y Marina (which would become the Ministry of Defense) he employed 14 different ministers, with some lasting only hours (none lasted more than a year) (Hoy 1932a). Given that precedent, in 1932 the editors of *Hoy* argued that Bello was “for the moment like the guide of Caesar’s legions through Gaul. Will it be absolutely necessary

to cross the Rubicon?” (Hoy 1932b). The sense of high drama would soon fade. Neither the minister nor the ministry were ever high profile, to the point that in 1936 the same publication noted that Bello’s opinions seemed to matter less and that Commanders in Chief were often seen talking directly to the Minister of Finance about their budgets (Hoy 1936a). The Defense Ministry had soon been left out of the political loop and became irrelevant.

There were, however, positive developments in the composition of the cabinet: no officer of any branch would serve in the cabinet from 1932 to 1943, which marked a return to the pattern that had, with only periodic exceptions, held from the 1830s until the political crisis of 1924–1932. Indeed, Chilean political turmoil in the twentieth century has been marked by an increase in military cabinet members. Beginning in late 1972 and accelerating in the months leading up to the 1973 coup, Salvador Allende shuffled generals and admirals through cabinet posts in the hope of staving off rebellion. In short, Alessandri had achieved ministerial stability (no small feat) but simultaneously weakened the institutional capacity of the ministry itself.

Defense budgets

Given the military’s low level of social and political support, it was easy for Alessandri to cut its budget. Laws were quickly passed that cut military salaries by 30%, the number of conscripts dropped, an entire army division was eliminated, and the navy was told to operate ships that ran on coal because it would receive no oil (Maldonado 1988a, 31–4). Nonetheless, compared to other Latin American countries, the Chilean military did not suffer greatly in budgetary terms. For example, in 1940 the defense budget comprised 2.5% of GDP, compared to 2.2% in Peru, 2.3% in Argentina, and 2.8% in Brazil (Nunn 1976, 250). Yet, at the same time, there was a clear sense that post-1932 governments were not greatly attuned to military budget requests. The pattern was to avoid the issue of salaries until public military protest made it impossible to ignore. The army was initially resigned to this fiscal reality, and when Alessandri took office, Commander in Chief Vignola sent a circular to his troops, urging them to avoid becoming involved in politics and alerting them to “the possibility that the Army will have to make difficult sacrifices to keep itself within the budget the Government has set for the year 1933” (Hoy 1932b). Cuts went largely unnoticed in the press, with the exception of *Hoy*, which followed the issue and criticized Alessandri for leaving the military underfunded and sacrificing good officers “on the altar of *civilismo*” (Hoy 1935).

The combination of budget inattention and lack of authority at the Defense Ministry set the stage for losing the direction of the military. Left to its own devices, the armed forces found the United States to be ready and willing to provide the education, training, and equipment that their own government chose not to fund. Through Lend-Lease programs during World War II, the United States sold USD50 million of armaments and munitions to Chile at steep discounts in an effort to combat Chilean Marxism (Weeks 2003, 36). After the onset of the Cold War, a large surplus of weapons served to expand US influence with militaries in the region. The Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949 began the flow of military aid to the region, and between 1950 and 1960, Chile would receive USD48 million in aid; the third highest in the region (Loveman 2001, 52). Chilean officers would also travel to the United States for

training and courses, which would eventually include an emphasis on internal security and anti-Communism. These developments further contributed to the weakening of civil-military institutions in Chile, as the presence of the United States reduced even further the need for Chilean policy makers to devote attention to military matters.

Even before the Cold War began, the Chilean pattern of civil-military inattention was well solidified. Policy makers were not interested in and did not understand the military's requests for weapon and equipment upgrades, did not scrutinize military budgets, and did not much care about doctrinal development, which became increasingly anti-political. It is no surprise, then, that officers were pleased that the United States offered training and equipment, and US concerns about Communist infiltration very neatly matched the budding concerns within the Chilean armed forces as well.

Centralizing political power

In the name of restoring order, Alessandri moved quickly to ensure the dominance of the presidency, which was often met with vehement protest from both civilian and military quarters. In addition to consolidating a strong presidential regime, he would successfully quash his opposition by clamping down hard on both civilian and military dissidence, but he also reinforced both the weakness of the Defense Ministry and the legislative branch. The president would bypass institutional channels, and at times use the military (purged of all potentially troublesome officers) to quell political conflict. So, as Alessandri set a precedent for presidentialism (including use of military power), he also weakened the other institutions of civil-military contact. The legislature never developed any capacity for oversight.

President Alessandri utilized "emergency powers" (*facultades extraordinarias*) on an almost constant basis. Granted by Congress, such powers were institutionalized in the 1830s, and provided the president wide latitude to address perceived threats to internal order. Several examples serve to demonstrate the facility with which he utilized these powers and the ways in which he used them to consolidate the power of the executive and keep the military "clean" of outside (especially Leftist) political influence. He would also utilize either the *Milicia* or, especially later in his administration, the army to combat his perceived enemies. Although Congressional approval was required, given the power of the "right" in the 1930s (although comprised of different coalitions over time, the president skillfully negotiated them), Alessandri routinely had enough votes despite a highly vocal minority. As one senator from the splinter Partido Democrático noted:

I am opposed in principle to emergency powers. I've always been against them, but my party has an understanding with the Conservative and Liberal Parties on only two points: to defend the civility of the country and to give the government all the necessary laws so it can govern. (Senado de Chile 1936a, 90)

The only assertion of Congressional influence came in the form of shortening the length of time. Typically, Alessandri requested six months and received them, but at times was granted only days. In the mid-1930s, Alessandri's use of such powers, which often included utilizing the army, increased. Formal institutions became weaker as a result.

In April 1933, only four months after his inauguration, Alessandri announced that he needed emergency powers to combat Socialist and Communist agitators. Pro-government papers stuffed the news, saying only that they should be “inspired in the strictly well-understood interests of the *Patria*” (*El Mercurio* 1933b) and that they were necessary given a selfish “turbulent minority” (*La Nación* 1933) which sought to harm those interests. Conservatives, liberals, and radicals were in favor.

But the reaction was not universally so sanguine: “This seems to be the fruit of a political psychosis, of a passionate history that is out of control” (*Hoy* 1933). The opposition viewed his request as a way to increase the power of the *Milicia* and, by extension, Alessandri’s personal power. As one member of Congress argued, “the *Milicia Republicana* constitutes a rebellious armed force at the margin of the law and are composed of elements of the privileged class that defend their own rights which are not, of course, the rights of the common people” (Cámara de Diputados de Chile 1933, 2265). Retired army general and former War Minister Ramón Vergara Montero complained in a letter to General Novoa that Alessandri, the “Great Corruptor [*Gran Corruptor*]”, was manipulating the army and trying to shape it into a Praetorian guard (Vergara 1939, 57–9).

In addition to the use of emergency powers, Alessandri utilized the army and national police to quell disputes. In 1935, peasants in Ránquil fought with landowners, who received assistance from the government in the form of army troops. Hundreds died. The same year, a railroad strike compelled Alessandri to send army troops to quell disorder and restore train services. Using a state of siege decree (Congress was not in session so Alessandri was able to use decree power), he brought in the army, which made approximately 500 arrests, justified as essential for maintaining the security of the state (Alessandri 1967, 63–4; Loveman and Lira 2000, 42). The detainees were placed under the jurisdiction of military courts.

In March 1936, Congress approved *facultades extraordinarias* in the wake of a military conspiracy in the previous month, blamed by Alessandri on Juan Antonio Ríos, a member of Congress, who had his congressional immunity removed (Article 33 of the 1925 Constitution allowed for arrest in the case of being caught in the act [*delito flagrante*]) and was arrested. Once again, army courts charged and imprisoned alleged conspirators. Conservatives applauded these actions, as *El Diario Ilustrado* (1936) noted that “order is constantly threatened” in the form “abominable machinations” by the Left. The opposition questioned whether any threat existed at all. How did these “curious subversives that no one knows” get to the Commander in Chief and “where is this enemy that we’re never allowed to see?” (*La Hora* 1936). *La Opinión* argued that the evidence of a plot was faked to provide an excuse for the emergency powers (*La Opinión* 1936). An opposition senator noted that the country had been under some type of exceptional rule for eight months “on the pretext of a revolutionary attempt that never materialized” (Senado de Chile 1936b, 78). In November 1936, Alessandri called for a state of siege (using decree power as, again, Congress wasn’t in session), after members of the Nazi Party shot into a crowd at the Rancagua train station after a party meeting (*El Mercurio* 1936a). The government trashed the offices of their paper, *Trabajo*, and prohibited publication. Alessandri called for the law of internal security to be passed, and the Interior Minister went to Congress for that purpose (*El Mercurio* 1936b). He used the example of Spain to explain why restricting liberty (especially the freedom of Communist agitation) was necessary to protect it (Donoso 1952, 198–9).

At Alessandri's request, the next month, congressional debate began over what would become the Law of the Internal Security of the State (*Ley de Seguridad Interior del Estado*), Law 6026. The attitude of the government is summed up by one pro-Alessandri senator, who argued that "governments fall primarily because of excessive concessions they give to their opponents, and because of failing to maintain in an energetic manner the social discipline that must exist for the progress of nations" (Senado de Chile 1937, 1020). The Left averred that Alessandri sought to govern Chile just like Torquemada, the First Grand Inquisitor of Spain (Senado de Chile 1937, 986). The debate soon included a discussion of the armed forces, as the socialists argued that the government was using the law as an excuse to persecute any member of the military who read Leftist publications. That position came largely from Marmaduke Grove, an outspoken retired army colonel and socialist who had been at the center of controversy for years and had been an integral part of the Socialist Republic. When told that the Left wanted to kill all enemies of the Soviet Union, Grove inspired laughter with, "We'll protect your wives and your children [...] but all of you will die. The old will die a natural death, and everyone else will die of surprise" (Senado de Chile 1937, 1057). It was passed over the protests of the Left (barely, with 65 to 60 in the lower house and 22 to 18 in the Senate) and until the 1970s would provide the legal basis for repression.

On 5 September 1938 a show of force by the Nazi Party (with the support of Carlos Ibáñez) followed the movement's parade in Santiago, with the intent of overthrowing Alessandri. A group took control of the Social Security building, while others took the main building of the Universidad de Chile. A combination of army and police attacked the latter, taking most as prisoner (Donoso 1952, 260). Army and police then proceeded to the Social Security building and, after taking control, turned machine guns on at least 60 and then imprisoned Ibáñez (Loveman 2001, 210). At the same time, Alessandri requested emergency powers for the remainder of his term and closed two opposition newspapers with Congress' support; a move that had support from conservatives, as the coup attempt was the result of a press that "lies daily" as well as "a long period of tolerance and weakness" (*El Diario Ilustrado* 1938). He also pushed Novoa to publish a declaration, signed by all generals, that the army supported the constitution and the government (Alessandri 1967, 231). Novoa wrote a public letter, refuting the Nazis' claim that they had support within the army, an idea he said was "absurd" and was only an attempt to damage the army's prestige (*El Mercurio* 1938). Ibáñez then removed his name for candidacy in the 1938 presidential election.

Given Alessandri's use of presidential prerogatives under the 1925 constitution, the 1930s did not represent an auspicious era for Congressional influence over the executive. Alessandri had been the spokesman for presidential dominance in the 1920s, and that attitude did not shift when he took office once again. None of Alessandri's statements or actions suggest anything but that defense decisions should be entrusted to the executive.

Nonetheless, this assertion of presidential power vis-à-vis the armed forces should not be attributed solely to Alessandri. Congress could have exerted more influence over defense; indeed, in other areas it did not simply accede to presidential mandates. Despite presidential prerogatives, parties were often able to block, or at least amend, legislation proposed by the president, or in some cases reduce the length of time for the

use of emergency powers. In particular, after 1932, shifting partisan coalitions made it difficult for presidents to count on votes on a regular basis on all issues.

Instead, for decades, Congress chose not to fight the executive tilt and to leave defense to the president. Members of Congress showed no interest in defense planning and viewed the committees for national defense as unimportant. For example, in the Senate, senior senators were placed in higher profile and more prestigious committees such as Finance or Constitution, Legislation, Justice, and Rules. Senators with less experience had to accept National Defense as they waited for other positions to become available (Agor 1971, 85). The belief that the military was permanently in the barracks, combined with the pressing issues of land reform, the growing political awareness of the working class, periodic economic turbulence (including concern that unrest in Europe could disrupt trade), and other similar issues meant that members of Congress, along with the political parties to which they belonged, would play no role in shaping defense policy or military strategy.

Alessandri's strategies were echoed by his successor. When Pedro Aguirre Cerda took office in 1938 as part of the Frente Popular coalition, he brought with him an ambitious socio-economic program that did not include military improvements, especially with regard to salaries, a subject that would be a bone of contention until President Salvador Allende would raise salaries in 1971–1972. Aguirre's first Minister of Defense, Alberto Cabero, wrote that he often had to ask the president to use decrees simply to bring the budget up to the minimum necessary to feed and clothe the troops. Cabero noted that, in 1939, the palace military escort in Viña del Mar had to be chosen "among those few [soldiers] that had presentable shoes and clothing" (Cabero 1948, 318).

Cabero would consciously follow Emilio Bello's example. A member of the Radical Party and a close friend of Aguirre, Cabero had for two weeks been a member of the 1932 *junta* that marked the second (and more civilian) phase of the crumbling Socialist Republic. Despite that participation, Cabero was no military conspirator. In his memoirs, he refers repeatedly to Bello and his "energetic attitude" toward the armed forces and notes that his own goal was to emulate the success of his predecessor (Cabero 1948, 138). For example, both rejected having active-duty officers serve in the ministry and both were careful to weed out officers deemed too politicized. Equally important, however, was that neither minister was particularly interested in working on the details of military budgets, increasing contacts between loyal officers and policy makers, or influencing military education and doctrine. Bello had General Novoa to perform most of the duties, and Cabero had army Commanders in Chief Carlos Fuentes, Oscar Escudero, and Arturo Espinoza, who were also allowed to take the army in virtually any direction, as long as its members did not interfere in politics.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, President Alessandri established a strategy for civil-military relations in the wake of the implosion of military rule. Its essence was to allow a large degree of military autonomy within a strong presidential system in exchange for the armed forces staying out of politics. Officers who violated this tacit agreement were, especially with the help of army Commander in Chief General Novoa, forced into retirement. In many

ways, this strategy was successful. Between 1932 and 1973, military rebellions failed and Chile experienced uninterrupted civilian rule, unlike much of the region. What this article has demonstrated, however, is that, although civilian strategies proved highly effective in the short term, the failure to strengthen civil-military institutions ultimately carried with it a high cost in the longer term.

By the 1950s, politicians believed that “la cuestión militar” was much less relevant. The Ministry of Defense had no influence, to the point of being ignored by the rest of the government. Members of Congress viewed committees on defense as the least desirable appointment and rarely discussed defense policy at all. Finally, without civilian oversight, the armed forces deepened their anti-political beliefs, which included a deeply held suspicion of the Left. Over the long term, therefore, civil-military contacts diminished to the point that, by the 1960s, when socio-economic crises rocked the country and culminated in the election of Salvador Allende in 1970, civilians had little idea about what military leaders thought of how the armed forces would respond to political upheaval.

This does not mean the coup would not have occurred had policy in 1930s been different, but it does strongly suggest that institutional neglect prevented civilians from understanding the depths of distrust and resentment that had begun to grow within the military, and had provided no structure of providing direction to the armed forces. The so-called “Tacnazo” insurrection against the Eduardo Frei government in 1969 was brief and non-violent, but was the first public sign of the long-standing civil-military divide. Alessandri’s efforts to keep a tight rein on the military did not constitute a coherent formulation of defense policy. The roots of civil-military stability became, in part, an element of future instability. Ultimately, the moderate civilian opposition to President Allende assumed the military would be a similarly moderate political ally. The ignominious end to military adventurism in 1932 and the transition to electoral democracy did not establish as firm a foundation of civilian rule as was commonly believed.

The conceptual lesson for the contemporary period is that civilian control entails much more than avoiding coups or rebellion in the short term. Civil-military institutions and civilian leadership matter for democracy. Compounded over years, civilian inattention can lead to estrangement, which in turn can gradually erode civilian supremacy and, by extension, democracy itself.

Notes

1. The newspapers are *El Diario Ilustrado* (conservative and Catholic), *El Mercurio* (moderate and pro-Alessandri), *Hoy* (anti-Alessandri and pro-Ibáñez), *La Hora* (Radical Party), *La Nación* (government owned), and *La Opinión* (socialist).
2. For a good discussion of the general characteristics of modes of transition, see Mainwaring (1992).
3. For an analysis of the Latin American military’s historical mission to intervene when it believes the nation is at risk, see Loveman (1999).
4. For a good overview, see Nunn (1970).
5. This was a common argument. See also *El Diario Ilustrado* (1933).
6. The 1932 decree was not the first attempt to establish the ministry. On 23 May 1927, Ibáñez decreed the fusion of the two ministries into one named “National Defense”, but changed

his mind and separated them again a month later. The ministry was revived by a March 1932 law, but separated once again by the Socialist Republic in July 1932.

7. The national police remained in the Interior Ministry until the military government of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990).
8. This change caused some consternation among officers, as did new changes enacted during the Aguirre government, which removed the word “God” from the oath entirely.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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