

Eduardo Frei Montalva (1911-1982)

Mark Falcoff

Editor's Note. Wishing to honor in a special way the memory of Eduardo Frei, whose life and work embodied so well the principles *The Review of Politics* stands for, we asked his friend and longtime student of his career, Mark Falcoff, to commemorate him.

The unexpected death of former Chilean President Eduardo Frei Montalva in Santiago on 21 January 1982 has suddenly deprived his country and the international Christian Democratic movement of one of its firmest pillars — a force for justice, decency and order in Latin America and the world. At a time when the very profession of politics has fallen into a sort of fashionable disrepute throughout the democratic world, and the notions of compromise, conciliation, and community seem less attractive than ideological purification and a post-“political” order, men like Frei serve to remind us that there *are* alternatives, if we would but pursue them.

Eduardo Frei was born in Santiago in 1911, at a time when Chile was still riding high the crest of a nitrate boom which began with her victory in the War of the Pacific (1879-83) against Bolivia and Peru. By the time he entered school in the twenties, however, the nation's financial stability had been seriously undermined by the introduction of synthetic substitutes developed by the Germans during the First World War. Although American companies developed Chile's copper resources in the following decade, the boom times of the 1890's never returned. Frei's university years were lived under the shadow of the Great Depression, which struck Chile harder than any country in the Western world, and brought the “social question” to the forefront of political concerns.

A brilliant, serious-minded student, Frei came from an observant Catholic home, which influenced his decision during university days to join the youth wing of Chile's historic Conservative party. Somewhat misleadingly named the National Falange (its principal point of contact with Franco's movement was the title), this body split off from its more backward-looking parent in 1935 to become the Christian Democratic party. Rejecting both *laissez-faire* capitalism and Marxism as unnecessarily polarizing options

for Chile, the Christian Democrats called for a communitarian Third Way which would balance public and private sectors, redistribute wealth and economic opportunity, and democratize the workplace through self-management. As time went on, the Christian Democrats added to their program agrarian reform and the recuperation of Chile's mineral resources from foreign capital.

Frei himself had an extraordinarily varied career. Although a labor lawyer by profession, his first job was editing a newspaper in the nitrate region of Tarapacá. He entered the Chamber of Deputies in the late thirties, and eventually became minister of public works in the government of President Gabriel González Videla (1946-52). For some years he represented the province of Santiago in the Chilean senate, running unsuccessfully for president in 1958. In 1964, however, he ran once again—this time in a two-way race—in which he defeated Socialist Salvador Allende, a candidate also supported by the Chilean Communists.

Frei's victory in 1964—with an unprecedented 56 percent of the vote—opened the way to six years of development and reform which the Christian Democrats proudly labeled a "revolution in liberty." These years were characterized by a comprehensive agrarian reform law, the "Chileanization" of copper resources, considerable expansion of social services, increased tax collections, and modernization of education. Specifically, more than 20,000 rural families were enfranchised on new lands expropriated from unproductive latifundia; joint ventures with the American copper companies allowed both for the expansion of production and the gradual acquisition of their stock by the Chilean state. And, be it noted, in addition to coaxing new infusions of capital and technology into Chile's most important industry, Frei was able to sharply increase the tax contribution made by Anaconda and Kennecott. A new program—*promoción popular*—aimed at incorporating into the political and social process recent migrants to Chile's mushrooming cities.

Frei had considerable luck in the implementation of these schemes. The United States was in the first flush of romance with democratic reform in Latin America, and Frei's first two years coincided with an unprecedented level of interest and aid on the part of the Johnson administration. In fact, it was often said that Chile was selected to be a showcase for the Alliance for Progress, under which program it received the largest per capita share of resources in the hemisphere. The Vietnam war added an additional bonus by provoking a sharp rise in copper prices. By

respecting both due process and legislative prerogative, Frei allowed amendments to be tacked on the agrarian reform law which—while denounced at the time by the Left and even by some members of his own party as an unacceptable compromise—actually had the effect of increasing food production and thus saving millions of dollars in precious foreign exchange.

By 1968 and 1969 the luck had run out: the Nixon administration began cutting back on aid, inflation began to rise again, much of the Christian Democratic electoral base slipped to the Right. The Conservatives, emboldened by their opportunity, fielded a candidate of their own for the presidency, former chief executive Jorge Alessandri. The Christian Democrats themselves split, with the candidate of the party's left, Radomiro Tomic, grabbing the presidential candidacy in 1970 on a platform hardly less radical than that offered by the Marxist parties. This division between Center and Right, or even, between Center-Left and Right, provided the opening through which Salvador Allende edged into power—on a tiny margin of less than two percentage points of the vote. In spite of all the problems besetting Chile in 1970, it is sobering to reflect that had the Chilean constitution permitted the president to succeed himself, Frei would easily have won another six-year term. Instead, his country was plunged into the maelstrom of class war, and eventually, a military coup.

II.

Frei's role during the Allende years has been the subject of much controversy, some of it based on a rather blurred reading of newspaper headlines. It is true that he was approached shortly after the 1970 elections by the Nixon administration with a view to blocking Allende's accession to power through a "preventive coup"; this scenario would have permitted Frei to retain office, or at least, to run again within a six-month period. It is not true, however, that he agreed to the plan. Indeed, it was his pointed refusal to sacrifice Chilean democratic traditions which made possible Allende's accession to power through a vote of the Chilean Congress. This he did, he later told me, in spite of serious premonitions as to the ultimate outcome of events, for he was convinced from the very beginning that "Allende's government would end in fire and blood."

It is also true that he strongly opposed the Marxist regime, rallying a joint front which included the parties of the Right. That front, in the final electoral race of the Allende period (March

1973), received 56 percent of the vote, indicating that after three years Allende had still failed to win a majority of the Chilean people to his program. It is not true that Frei connived at a military coup, or supported the idea of a drastic shift in Chilean political institutions such as actually took place, although in the end he recognized, as did most Chileans, that only the military could break the stalemate into which the politicians had pushed the country. (But this, of course, was also Allende's view, as he attempted to co-opt the high command for his own purposes.)

Finally, it is true—as was revealed even before Allende's fall—that in 1964 the Christian Democrats had received massive subsidies for the presidential campaign from the CIA and from European Christian Democratic sources. However, even the Church Committee of the United States Senate, otherwise so critical of United States purposes in Chile, admitted that in the absence of such monies the outcome of that election would not have been different, save that Frei would have been elected by a plurality rather than a majority. (It was the majority, however, which armed him with the powers to push through his social reforms; if anything, the CIA subsidy "bought" Frei some room for maneuver within the context of Chilean democratic politics.)

III.

The years following the coup were somber ones for Frei. Disappointed by the unexpected appetite for power displayed by Chile's new military rulers, he found himself once again thrown into the leadership of the opposition. But by now the picture—both domestically and internationally—had changed, and there was little to do but rally a standard to which he alone, with his immense prestige abroad, was in a position to raise. His unpretentious office in downtown Santiago was a virtual nerve center for friends of Chilean democracy from the United States, Western Europe, and other Latin American nations. He saw his role clearly: as denying the Marxists the monopoly which they have claimed—with really breathtaking presumption—over the issues of political freedom and human rights. Under his leadership the Christian Democrats (officially proscribed but in fact very much alive within the country) steadfastly refused to make common cause with the Communists and Socialists, which he regarded—rightly—as ultimately responsible for the collapse of democracy in Chile.

During his final years Frei spent much time in Western

Europe, particularly participating in the drafting of the Brandt Commission Report. At one point a Chilean leftist "theoretician" made the rather ungenerous comment that Frei apparently found "the affairs of the country too small and trivial for his exalted attention," but this was, as usual, very wide of the mark. Frei labored on the Brandt Commission because he believed it gave him an opportunity for constructive work which he felt unable to carry out at home. His critics and detractors — and they are many, both on the Left and the Right — will always be forced to confront the inconvenient fact that to the very end he could have won any presidential race in Chile, against any candidate.

IV.

Permit me to close on a personal note. President Frei was a man who took himself seriously, but he was not given to ostentatious display or the kind of heedless accumulation which is the hallmark of so many Latin American politicians, Allende included. He lived in the same middle-class home as president that he had as a member of congress; his office in Santiago was by no means luxurious. Nor was he surrounded by a fawning secretariat of retainers leaping at his every command. It was not uncommon in the last years to see him standing alone on Huerfanos Street in the late afternoon or early evening waiting for his driver to pick him up; briefcase in hand, he would courteously acknowledge the greetings of passers-by. This image will always be juxtaposed in my mind with another — from a photograph on his office wall. It was taken on the day of his inauguration in 1964, at the moment when the presidential party was leaving the congress building. Behind Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, who leads the procession, Frei, in opera dress and the presidential sash, has raised his right hand to greet the multitudes with an expression in which one can read, alternatively, intelligence and realism, optimism and hope. I feel sure that — past the errors, humiliations, tears, blood, and dashed opportunities of the years that followed — it is thus that Chile will remember Frei. And so should we all.