The final and definitive break with the democratic order took place on 11 September 1973, when the Chilean armed forces launched a military attack against the Unidad Popular government of President Salvador Allende. Although there was token resistance from left-wing forces and a minority of military personnel still loyal to the administration, victory for the coup plotters was quickly secured. ‘The Battle of Chile’, as the violent insurrection and the consequent resistance came to be known, had a major impact internationally. Not only was it ferocious, but it was also perceived to symbolize the essential conflict between left and right. In Chile, the coup marked a new epoch in the country’s political evolution, the final rupture in a long democratic tradition.

THE RIGHT’S REACTION TO THE COUP

The armed forces emerged as the ideal inheritors for a right beset by crisis and thereby unable to assume political power directly. Not only did the military have a strong aversion to Marxism, compromise and political parties, it also lacked a global project, administrative know-how and had little experience of government. The right quickly became aware of the influence it might exercise over the military in addition to the new problems which such a relationship posed. To solve this predicament the Partido Nacional (PN) voluntarily dissolved itself three days after the military coup, and in so doing demonstrated its unwillingness to compete for power with the military. By the end of 1973, it ceased to exist as a structured entity. This was inevitable given that the new regime had simultaneously imposed a ‘recess’ of party and pressure group activity. It had not been clear whether the military would be prepared to accept pacts or explicit agreements in relation to its pursuit of power. By unilaterally disbanding, the PN pushed the armed forces into pursuing long-term aims. Consequently, the military rallied around the ‘national interest’ slogan with its concurrent pretence of neutrality and the ‘common good’. The leaders of the right were swift in making the necessary signals to prove their willingness to hand over sovereignty. Political action through parties was exchanged for negotiation and movements in order to attain positions of influence within the new state apparatus.
The first dilemma facing what was, in effect, a heterogeneous right-wing coalition arose from the question of the regime’s future, or lack of it. Two main tendencies emerged within days of the coup: a *restauradora* position, supported by more moderate elements within the coalition, which favoured a return to the pre-1973 democratic system; and an authoritarian tendency which hoped to use the military to institute a radical change of Chile’s political, economic, and social structures. The conflict between these two tendencies ended in early October 1973, following the military government’s decree proscribing all Marxist parties. More significantly, the contents of the decree included references to the creation of a *nueva institucionalidad.* This theme became the focus of official policy with Pinochet outlining in November 1973 three possible options *vis-à-vis* the future of the military regime: a short transition government, the establishment of a ‘purifying’ civilian–military administration or an ‘absolute and permanent’ military regime. He quickly rejected both the first and last option by asserting that ‘jamás hemos pensado perpetuarnos en el poder y la primera alternativa se observa prematura’, and as such the new civilian–military coalition would be ‘profundamente nacionalista, ajeno a lo que divide, como es el caso de los partidos políticos, porque existen ideales comunes que están por encima de lo meramente partidista’.

This marked the unequivocal defeat of the *restauradores.* Government documents and declarations now reflected the new ‘foundational’ nature of the regime. As a result of this split within the initial *golpista* coalition, the military government lost the support of the more moderate elements within the right who had supported the coup as a lesser of two evils, including an important section of the traditional right. Its members now abandoned active political action and returned to various, mainly legal and entrepreneurial forms of private activity.

Why had the more extreme faction emerged victorious over the more moderate elements of the coalition? First, because of the ability of the *autoritarios* to adapt themselves to the military’s limited political vision. This consisted of a desire to dismantle political parties and transfer total power to the armed forces, as well as a paranoid fear of anyone questioning this power or wishing to share in it. Second, the counter-revolutionary model was influenced by the manner in which the coup had taken place. The disproportionate level of violence carried out by the military against its enemies, the traumatic symbolism of the bombing of the *La Moneda* presidential palace, the