Speech delivered following the passing of President Pedro Aguirre Cerda. December 7, 1941[112]

El Centro Universitario (The University Center), an institution that welcomes within its arms the studious youth of this place, joins with profoundly shaken emotion in the posthumous tribute that San Bernardo pays to the illustrious President of Chile who has just passed away.

Young men, who are beginning to build our lives upon the shifting and harsh soil of earthly reality, find in the contemplation of those who have already completed their life's work fruitful suggestions that the mature eye often fails to perceive. No lesson is more filled with robust teachings than the life of a man, particularly when, as in the case of President Aguirre Cerda, it has been laboriously forged to fulfill a great and generous destiny. And no field is more fertile for the seed of those teachings to bear fruit than the always wide open spirit of idealistic youth.

It has been frequently repeated in recent days that it is not yet time to judge the work of Don Pedro Aguirre as a man and as a statesman. But we, the youth, untainted by quarrels or pettiness, know full well that the verdict of History will be favorable to him, and we believe it is neither honest nor right to delay justice.

He was simply Don Pedro. That is how his people knew him; that is how he made himself loved by them. Simple as his rural childhood, gentle as his good-natured smile, he did not become conceited with his victories and always knew how to maintain an affectionate manner and a wide open heart for his favorite friends: the humble. What in others is often demagoguery, in him was merely naturalness.

A man of effort, he was the personal architect of his continuous successes. When he began his path, he lacked wealth and social standing. He never possessed outward brilliance. He lacked those apparent virtues that open the path to easy triumphs. But he possessed aspirations, talent, and willpower; he knew how to choose the steep and difficult path that leads to the summits of truth, and he knew how to always march along it, regardless of obstacles or sacrifices.

In this way, he excelled in the courtroom and the lecture hall, his preferred occupations, gaining in them a well-deserved prestige as an upright, intelligent, and well-educated man.

But he did not direct his efforts toward a purely selfish end of private satisfaction. His soul ignited by noble idealism, his fundamental and constant concern was the service of the Homeland. He consecrated himself to it in politics, in the performance of his duties as a teacher, in the exercise of his profession as a lawyer, and even in his entirely private activities as a farmer. In all these endeavors, he revealed altruism and an interest in the public good, and in each of them, he carried out numerous initiatives of social benefit. Especially worthy of remembrance are his valuable contributions to

[1] This speech bears a handwritten note by Patricio Aylwin: "Speech delivered on December 7, 1941, in tribute to Don Pedro. It was sent to Mrs. Juana A. de Cerda [referring to the President's wife, Juana Aguirre Luco], with the following dedication: To the noble wife of Don Pedro, with the most respectful and heartfelt condolences. Patricio Aylwin Azócar."

education, to which he attributed such crucial importance for the future of Chile, and his profound studies on the most crucial Chilean problems, to two of which— agriculture and industry— he dedicated separate books of recognized value.

When he aspired to the highest Office of the Republic, he was thus able to present in his support, before the judgment of his fellow citizens, a well-filled record of fruitful labors at the service of Chile, the most secure guarantee of patriotism, selflessness, and capacity. Not everyone can, nor does everyone strive to do the same!

And when the Nation placed its hopes in him, he worked tirelessly to correspond to them in the best possible way. A Chilean above all else, his primary desire was to overcome the factionalism that divided the country, to moderate fratricidal passions, and to bring about harmony; he knew how to be the President of all Chileans. Endowed with understanding tolerance, an exquisite gift of cultured spirits and an inescapable prerequisite for any truly democratic and humane coexistence, he respected all creeds and opinions, and granted a level of freedom that perhaps the Republic had never known to such a high degree. His entire being steeped in the essence of Law, he rejected arbitrary violence and conformed his conduct to the superior precepts of the Law and natural Justice. This was not, to him, a resonant word useful for demagoguery; it was an imperative will, according to the classical definition of giving to each what is theirs. He tried as much as he could to realize it, conscious that he thus embodied the innermost aspirations of his people.

He was called upon to govern under adverse circumstances. Tremendous obstacles rose against him, and to the serious problems that inexorable fate placed to his tasks were added others, no less pernicious, generated by the narrow-mindedness and lack of understanding of political circles. It is necessary to confess, with manly energy, that Don Pedro Aguirre, although he sought them out, had very few truly efficient and loyal collaborators. And here we must find the principal cause why not all his efforts reached the happy outcome they deserved.

Do you not believe, gentlemen, that all these essential virtues, as a citizen and as a ruler, are sufficient on their own to secure Aguirre Cerda, from this moment forward, a prominent place in the History of the Homeland?

But there is something more I wish to highlight, because it grants President Aguirre the legitimate status of an authentic statesman. For many years, Chile has lived day to day, with its eyes fixed on the present narrow crossroads, forgetting the past and without thinking of the future. Don Pedro Aguirre Cerda, with clear and broad vision, understood that this attitude was leading us to the abyss of spiritual and material disintegration; that the very survival of the homeland, the maintenance of its unity, and the fulfillment of the promising destinies to which Chile was called, demanded a policy of vast scope, one that would draw its lifeblood from the traditions of our history and set its sights on the future of the Nation.

Hence, he undertook the task of reviving the veneration of national heroes, tying their memory to useful initiatives for collective progress. Hence, the most cherished goal of his governing labor was to enable Chile to successfully confront the contingencies of tomorrow: humanly, through education and the defense of the race, and economically, through the creation of new sources of wealth. Hence also

his efforts to elevate the proletariat in human dignity, economic well-being, and social standing, because he knew full well that Chile could not be truly great without Social Justice.

Future generations will know how to be grateful for this magnificent work. And we, the youth, who are at least the dawn of tomorrow, think from this very day as we contemplate it: here is a man who did good for the Homeland!

Gentlemen:
Inexorable fatality has taken this man away. But, alongside the pain that his absence causes us, the example of his life and the seed of his work remain among us. Youth sees in him a Master whose footsteps they intend to follow, and recognizes in his unfinished task an imperative call to assume the duty of completing it.