

# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup



Matias Spektor

Subject: History of Brazil, History of Latin America and the Oceanic World, 1945–1991, Diplomatic History

Online Publication Date: Apr 2018 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.551

### Summary and Keywords

The John F. Kennedy administration took a bet on the incoming president of Brazil, João Goulart, as he took office on September 8, 1961. Goulart was not a radical socialist, but his opponents portrayed him as an unpredictable nationalist who might unadvisedly fuel the flames of social upheaval and radical revolution, turning Brazil into a second Cuba. Yet, the White House estimated that Goulart was someone they could do business with and sympathized with the idea of *Reformas de Base* (Goulart's program of "basic reforms"), which included the extension of labor protections to rural workers, redistributive agrarian reform, and universal suffrage. United States support for Goulart materialized in the form of economic aid, financial assistance via the IMF, and development assistance via the Alliance for Progress partnership. Within a year, however, the tide turned as Goulart failed to comply with American demands that he ban leftists from his cabinet. In a matter of months in 1962, the White House abandoned any hopes of engagement with the Brazilian president. While the crisis that led to Goulart's fall in March 1964 was the making of domestic political actors within Brazil—as was the military coup to unseat the president—the likelihood and success rate of the *golpe* grew as the United States rolled out successive rounds of targeted actions against Goulart, including diplomatic and financial pressure, threats of abandonment, support for opposition politicians, collusion with coup plotters, signaling future military support for the plotters in the eventuality of civil war, and the granting of immediate diplomatic recognition for the incoming authoritarian military leaders after the coup. After Goulart, Brazil remained under authoritarian rule for two consecutive decades.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Robert F. Kennedy, João Goulart, Third World, military coup, Brazil, US foreign policy, Cold War, Cuban revolution

### Woes of the Brazilian Presidency

Jânio Quadros's resignation as president of Brazil on August 25, 1961 opened the most severe constitutional crisis in a generation. According to the law, the office would go to Vice President João Goulart, a man whose many opponents saw as a dangerous nationalist leftist bent on progressive social and economic reforms. Only two years after the Cuban revolution took the world by surprise, this was a name that high-ranking officials in the powerful Brazilian military—the *de facto* veto players in the country's political system—were not ready to accept. To be sure, Goulart was not a radical socialist. A decade earlier he had presided over the *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro* (PTB), a party with close ties to labor unions and home to those communist candidates who had, since 1947, been unable to run for office after *Partido Comunista do Brasil* was banned. Goulart had also been a prominent member of President Getulio Vargas's nationalist cabinet in 1953 and the successful vice-presidential candidate on the 1955 ticket with reform-minded Juscelino Kubitschek. Goulart had come to personify *Reformas de Base* (a program of "basic reforms"), which included the extension of labor protections to rural workers, redistributive agrarian reform, and universal suffrage (illiterates, comprising over half the adult population at the time, did not have the vote, nor did soldiers and sailors). In 1960, Goulart was elected vice president on the ticket with centrist and mercurial candidate Jânio Quadros, who took office on a platform of a more independent, anti-imperialist foreign policy advocating the restoration of diplomatic relations with Communist China, the Soviet Union, and East Germany, on top of building up the relationship with Havana. By the time Quadros resigned in August 1961, accidental president Goulart was seen by his critics at best as a Third World populist of the ilk of Juan Domingo Perón in neighboring Argentina, at worst as an unpredictable nationalist who might fuel the flames of social upheaval and radical revolution.

Goulart took office amidst great expectations for progressive change. Yet, the decks of Brazil's political system were stacked against reformist presidents. Under existing political rules, the country displayed a peculiar form of presidentialism: while presidents and vice presidents were elected in majority elections, members of the lower chamber of Congress were elected on proportional rules. In practice, this meant that Brazilian incumbents had a clear popular mandate to implement their campaign's programmatic promises, while *deputados* at the Chamber of Deputies had little commitment to see the president's agenda succeed and no concern to see majoritarian agendas through. In a fragmented legislature of several parties, the president was in a minority position. Forced to build a support coalition with members of Congress who had run for election on different platforms than that of his own and who had little incentive to see his government succeed, the Brazilian president had little choice but to dilute his own agenda to accommodate the preferences of coalition members. Parties in the coalition lent their support to the executive branch in exchange for pork, cabinet positions, and privileged access to managerial posts (and their associated budgets) in Brazil's sprawling state-owned companies, but had the prerogative to pick and choose which goods in the

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

presidential agenda they wanted to support. In such context, passing reforms was a major challenge, as the president had to charm, cajole, and sometimes threaten members of Congress to secure support for each item on his agenda. At the time Goulart came to office, the majority of the Brazilian Congress was in the hands of conservative parties who dismissed progressive change in the country's laws as a prelude to social upheaval and instability.

Then there was the military. In a system prone to clashes between a majority-vote executive and a proportional-representation legislature, no democratically elected president could remain in office without their support. Securing that support was not an easy operation for any president, however, because the military did not act in unison. Rather, competing factions—on the Left and on the Right, nationalist and antinationalist, for and against Vargas—vied for power and influence at each other's expense. Hence, military commanders intervened in politics regularly, but did so on the back of broad civilian political consensus. To do otherwise, they feared, may compromise military discipline and hierarchy in the ranks, hurting the chain of command and threatening the very ability the military had developed to exercise tutelage over national politics.

Brazilian presidents at the time also had to grapple with the frail state of the economy. This was a low-savings, high-debt, commodity-dependent economy where special interest groups bent on rent-seeking had privileged access to the levers of power. The political fortunes of incumbent presidents therefore depended to a considerable extent on the global price of export commodities such as coffee and on the level of international interest rates that determined the size of sovereign debt. In the 1950s, the Kubitschek government had overspent on borrowed money at a pace that, now in the 1960s, made it virtually impossible to run the government without massive injections of foreign loans, be them from the United States or from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For all practical purposes, this linked the domestic electoral cycle in Brazil to the ups and downs of the relationship with the US Treasury, opening the door to high levels of intrusion from American officials in the everyday management of the Brazilian government and administration.

Goulart was not the first president to suffer from the dysfunction at the heart of Brazilian politics. Getulio Vargas before him served for three and one-half years amidst entrenched opposition and paralysis before committing suicide in 1954. Juscelino Kubitschek managed to serve a full term to 1960, but at the cost of relinquishing much of the program that had secured his majority election in the first place and a dramatic deterioration of national fiscal health. And Jânio Quadros failed to build a reliable sustaining coalition, resigning after a mere seven months in office. Now the prospects of a Goulart presidency were dark. On the one hand, he had to keep the military chiefs and conservative civilian groups content enough not to unseat him; on the other, he needed to deliver on the social and economic reformist agenda his core base demanded without alienating the United States, whose financial support was critical to ensure a successful tenure. Reconciling these contending forces would require the building up of a

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

stronghold at the center of the political spectrum to prevent Brazilian politics from becoming radicalized at a time the Cuban revolution still sent shockwaves across Latin America.

When Quadros resigned from office in August 1961, Goulart was in Asia—the first visit by a Brazilian official in the presidential line of succession to Communist China. Taking advantage of the fact that the vice president was away, the military commanders of the army, the navy, and the air force set out to block his return and inauguration as president. To this end they imposed a state siege, including censorship of the press, radio, and television, plus the rounding up of pro-Goulart groups in major cities. The attempted coup, however, found little social support. The governor of Rio Grande do Sul (and Goulart's brother in law), Leonel Brizola, organized *Comitês de Resistência Democrática* alongside a nationwide network of radio stations to mobilize popular support for the vice president. Other powerful state governors who had presidential ambitions of their own did not want a military intervention, and the national student's union (UNE) and the national confederacy of Catholic bishops (CNBB) came out *en masse* in support of Goulart. After days of intense negotiations, a solution was found via a pact. Goulart would be allowed to return to Brazil to take office but do so under diminished presidential powers. An amendment to the Constitution would create the post of prime minister to be drawn from the seating Congress, where Goulart was in the minority. This semiparliamentary system would then be put to a vote by the people through a referendum to be held in April 1965, nine months before the end of Goulart's tenure and six months before the next scheduled presidential election.

## Kennedy's Initial Policy

The John F. Kennedy administration mistrusted Goulart from the outset, but it also felt there was too much at stake in Brazil to alienate the new president. The White House was particularly wary of the growing influence of *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasant Leagues) in the Brazilian Northeast. Since the 1950s, the *ligas* helped organize citizens in one of the poorest regions of South America to resist land eviction and demand civil and political rights in the countryside. Upheaval in that part of the world could trigger revolution, and the administration in Washington was not prepared to accept another Cuba in Latin America. In February 1961, the White House had sent its first mission of the Food for Peace Program to Brazil, and a month later President Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress (an aid program for Latin America which had in Brazil its single largest beneficiary). In May the president's brother, Edward "Ted" Kennedy—who would soon fill the president's seat in the US Senate—visited the Brazilian Northeast on a fact-finding mission, after which he published a set of articles for the *Boston Globe* on the dangers of communist revolution in the region. In July 1961, Kennedy hosted at the White House Celso Furtado, the chief official in charge of development policy for the Brazilian Northeast, a man many in Washington thought was a communist in disguise. Now, as

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

Goulart came to office, the Brazilian countryside was effervescent with political activism: a rural literacy program ran by the leftist sections of the Catholic Church with the explicit goal of promoting *conscientização* (political awareness), following the Cuban model, was gathering pace through the direct involvement of 200,000 peasants. In its turn, the national student's union (UNE) was flexing its muscle through active student militancy at levels unseen before and increasingly taking part in strikes alongside labor unions, while progressive priests were pushing for more radical Catholic doctrines by drawing on Pope John XXIII's papal encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (May 1961).

Upon learning that Goulart would be the next president of Brazil, the White House set out to engage him—albeit under strict conditions. Kennedy's proposal was that Washington would provide the economic assistance without which Goulart had little chance of success as long as the new president moved his administration in a more conservative direction. Aid and other forms of financial support would come through in exchange for (1) a turn in economic policy to curb rampant inflation (and thereby defuse potential social unrest), and (2) a commitment on the part of Goulart to purge his governing coalition of those individuals on the Left end of the political spectrum. To implement the policy, Kennedy in 1961 appointed Lincoln Gordon as US ambassador to Rio de Janeiro. The expectation at the time was that Goulart was someone the White House could do business with, for he was no revolutionary bent on disrupting Brazilian politics. On economic matters, he supported a larger role for the state, natural resource sovereignty, and some limit on the remittances of profits abroad by multinational corporations operating in Brazilian territory, but his agenda fitted well with capitalist development. On social issues, his progressive agenda of universal suffrage, labor protections, land redistribution, and welfare provision were seen by Washington officials as positive in a country that had seen too little social justice. Reform under Goulart's leadership could go a long way in stabilizing the country. As Gordon wrote in January 1962, "We have no choice but to work to strengthen this government . . . since there appears to be no viable alternative."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, Kennedy's policy bumped against major obstacles since its beginning. The Brazilian economy was sliding to recession—the first in two consecutive decades of economic growth. With inflation running as high as 50 percent in 1962, the Goulart government tried but failed to implement plans to cut down public expenditure and restrict credit. Congress made things worse by passing legislation to grant civil servants and the military a 70 percent increase in pay, while raising the minimum salary by more than 50 percent. Then Congress introduced the *décimo terceiro*, an additional month's wage paid to all workers at the end of the year. From the early days of the administration, Goulart struggled to manage his unruly coalition. Many—including some of his closest allies—saw him as ill-equipped to make decisions, and Ambassador Gordon soon began to cable back to Washington disparaging comments about the president's lack of experience in running a high executive office and his recurring equivocations. On three consecutive occasions between April and October 1962, Goulart tried but failed to pass a constitutional

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

amendment for modest land reform. The Rural Workers Statute he introduced in March was rejected by the Chamber in August.

Kennedy's policy suffered from limitations at home too. The president had narrowly won the 1960 election against Richard Nixon by outhawking the Republican Party on issues of foreign policy. Building up strong anticommunist credentials was critical for the success of the administration—and for securing the support of key Democratic senators and congressional representatives from the Southern states who controlled congressional committees. For this, Kennedy relied on the reputation of his younger brother, Robert “Bobby” Kennedy—the US attorney general—as a rabidly anticommunist Democrat who had a decade earlier served as an advisor to Senator Joseph McCarthy in the witch hunt for communists, homosexuals, and other “subversives.” Kennedy also needed the backing of American trade unions, which at the time had moved away from the progressive politics of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and to the Right, under the doctrine of “free labor.” The president's flexibility to accommodate someone like João Goulart was minimal. Any signals that the United States might be propping up a socialist leader in Latin America would give powerful ammunition to Kennedy's opponents, whom in April 1961 had seen the president botch the invasion at the Bay of Pigs.<sup>2</sup> From the standpoint of the White House, extending an open hand to Goulart was risky business.

## Engagement Unravels

Goulart had serious reservations about Kennedy's opening. Delivering on American demands was difficult for a reformist president whose powers had been curtailed by a conservative military-civilian compact. Issues of timing were critical: the Brazilian president was adamant that his first year in office would be devoted to pushing for an early plebiscite on the restoration of his full presidential powers, a decision that closed the door to any unpopular fiscal adjustment to balance the accounts as much as it created a powerful incentive for Goulart not to engage in earnest in building up the parliamentary system. The first year was therefore marked by instability. The first parliamentary cabinet under Tancredo Neves only lasted nine and a half months in post, and when San Tiago Dantas put his name forward as prime minister—a decision that would have honed the president's credentials as a centrist moderate—he was rejected by 174 parliamentary votes to 110. In 1962, two other *deputados* rose to the premiership only to resign days later in the face of worker strikes. Adding drama to the situation, in February 1962, Governor Brizola of Rio Grande do Sul expropriated a subsidiary of the ITT telephone company, prompting a tough rebuff in the US Congress (where senators introduced a bill demanding mandatory termination of financial aid to countries where American-owned companies were expropriated without monetary compensation). In subsequent months, other governors threatened to expropriate energy provider American & Foreign Power (AMFORP).

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

It is therefore unsurprising that when Goulart visited Kennedy at the White House in April 1962, the tenor of the conversation was tense. The visit was overshadowed by the issue of expropriation of American companies, and Kennedy went a long way in lecturing Goulart on the risks of communist infiltration in the labor unions that were becoming an ever bigger source of support for the Brazilian president. Nor is it surprising that the visit should divide the White House. By July, Dick Goodwin, special assistant to the president on questions relating to Latin America, saw Goulart as a lost cause. Supporters of the Brazilian president were arguing in favor of a revolution outside Congress, while a coalition of 1,300 labor unions across the country set up a Workers General Command (*Comando Geral dos Trabalhadores*). “We may very well want them [the Brazilian military] to take over at the end of the year, if they can,” said Goodwin. Ambassador Gordon and the president were more cautious. Gordon advised the president to send a signal to the Brazilian military that the United States would not be “necessarily hostile to any kind of military action whatsoever if it’s clear that the reason for the military action is. . .” President Kennedy completed the sentence: “Against the Left.” Gordon interjected: “He’s giving the damn country away to the. . .” “Communists,” concluded the president. The administration in Washington was becoming increasingly exasperated with Goulart, and a decision was made to have the CIA disburse financial support to his opponents. They also agreed to send Colonel Vernon Walters as military attaché to Brazil—Walters had worked with the Brazilian military in Italy toward the end of the Second World War, had excellent personal ties with key military chiefs, and spoke fluent Portuguese.<sup>3</sup> Starting in October 1962, the CIA began to give financial support to politicians opposing Goulart (US\$5 million according to Gordon, US\$20 million according to former CIA spy Philip Agee).<sup>4</sup> Alliance for Progress loans no longer went to the central government in Brasília, but began to flow in the direction of individual (mostly anti-Goulart) state governors.

At this juncture, the White House forcefully conditioned aid and financial support (via the US Treasury and via the IMF) on Goulart’s domestic political change. Issues of finance—and the plethora of negotiations and official travel between Washington and Brasília to set the terms of the bilateral economic relationship—became couched in terms of Goulart’s ability to manage his sustaining coalition. Documents pertaining to this period reveal levels of US intrusion in the everyday conduct of domestic policy in Brazil that smacks of older forms of colonialism. The United States had enormous leverage over Brazil through extensive economic, military, and political linkages, and the evidence available suggests that Kennedy’s was not so much a form of persuasion as it was a form of coercion. When private US company Hanna Mining lobbied for a freeze on financial aid to Brazil until the Goulart administration paid reparations on the nationalization of mines, the White House turned a blind eye to the request but pushed hard for negotiations on compensation pay for ITT and AMFORP. After Goulart paid compensation for the expropriation of ITT, the White House also authorized US\$430 million in new loans, and a mission flew down to Rio de Janeiro to oversee policy implementation. Goulart, in his turn, dealt with such pressures by equivocating and sending mixed messages that Washington had a hard time understanding. Several Goulart associates and ministers

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

openly criticized the United States, Ambassador Gordon, and the terms of the Alliance for Progress. A meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council at the White House on December 11, 1962 decided that Bobby Kennedy was to convey a personal ultimatum to Goulart. As he arrived in Brasília in the early hours of December 17, 1962, the president's brother carried a clear message: ban the Left from your administration or face the cost of US abandonment. But Goulart was defiant. As the meeting went on and on for hours, the attorney general passed a handwritten note to Ambassador Gordon that summarized his feelings, "We seem to be getting no place."<sup>5</sup>

Goulart's defiance had a clear motivation. Within days of the Kennedy administration's ultimatum, in January 1963 Brazilian voters had a chance to either support the parliamentary system that had curtailed the president's powers or opt to restore his full authority. Out of the 12.3 million people who voted, 9.5 million threw their weight in favor of Goulart, who secured three times the votes he had received as candidate for vice president on the 1960 ticket with Jânio Quadros. Adding to the president's empowerment, three months prior to the vote, his party, the PTB, excelled in the Congressional elections of October 1962, increasing its representation in the Chamber of Deputies from 66 to 116. The more reassured Goulart felt, the less willing he was to comply with US demands. And yet, Brazil's minority presidential system meant that having a clear popular mandate was not enough to pass reforms in a fragmented legislature. For all its electoral success, the PTB still commanded less than 30 percent of the seats in Congress, making it virtually impossible to pass legislation without forming a coalition with the more conservative parties that opposed Goulart. As a result, when he assumed full presidential powers on January 24, 1963, rather than roll out his reformist agenda at will, Goulart encountered entrenched congressional opposition and further turmoil on the streets. Inflation would soon peak to 75 percent and income per capita would fall for the first time since the Second World War. Less than fifteen months later, he would be out of politics for life.

## Abandonment and Destabilization

The year 1963 was one of constant turmoil in Brazil. Across the country there were 172 strikes (as compared to only 31 in 1958). The government had legally recognized 270 unions of rural workers encompassing half a million members, while another 500 such organizations applied for recognition. The more radical factions within the PTB and a range of activist movements openly discussed the terms of the revolution to come and insisted that the Goulart government abandon all effort to engage Congress in fruitless negotiations. Celso Furtado, now the minister of planning, unveiled a Three-Year Plan to grow the economy through progressive import substitution and turned to the United States for financial support to implement the policy. Back in Washington, Bobby Kennedy was now leading the argument for tightening the rope. "They're going to have to do something down there," he told President Kennedy on March 8. "This is not something that Congress will tolerate, the American people will tolerate, or that you can tolerate,"

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

he told the president. The US Congress, Bobby said, is “going to have a hell of a time trying to sell any kind of help and assistance to a country that wants this kind of money from us and yet at the same time puts important communists or people who are very anti-United States in important positions of power . . . we’re not fooling around about it, we’re not going to continue this forever . . . he can’t have it both way, can’t have the communists and put them in important positions and make speeches criticizing the United States and at the same time get 225–250 million dollars from the United States. He can’t have it both ways. He’s got to really make a choice, because you don’t have any choice about it.”<sup>6</sup> When Goulart’s minister of finance arrived in Washington two days later to negotiate the terms of a loan of US\$400 million, the conversations went nowhere. As the delegations met at the US Treasury, Ambassador Gordon was testifying before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that communists had infiltrated Brazilian institutions.

Back in Brazil, lower-ranking military officers were calling for the right to vote. In fact, in September 1963 about 600 navy and air force sergeants rebelled in Brasília, holding captive the president of the Chamber of Deputies and a minister of the Brazilian Supreme Court in protest against a decision of the Court to reject their right to be elected to public office. The *Comando Geral dos Trabalhadores* (Worker’s General Command, CGT) organized a general strike in their support, sending shockwaves across the higher echelons of the military establishment. In the face of massive strikes, mobilization of peasants, military insubordination, and threats to law and order, Goulart felt he better push for his reform agenda. On October 12, 1963, Gordon cabled Secretary of State Dean Rusk to lay out his fears of an imminent coup by Goulart himself. The ambassador believed Goulart might want to emulate President Getulio Vargas, who, in 1937, launched a coup from within the presidential palace to perpetuate himself in power. But because Goulart would be too incompetent to run the new regime, Gordon concluded, he might be overthrown by a more radical leader on the Left. The analogy the ambassador used to drive his point home was Egypt, where General Mohamed Naguib had been overthrown in 1954 by the more radical Gamal Nasser.<sup>7</sup> Gordon’s assessment, however, was far from unanimous. A report from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department estimated that Goulart was not about to establish an authoritarian regime, but sought instead to complete his mandate democratically. At the White House, people suspected that Gordon’s assessments might be compromised by the offense he took at the fact that so many pro-Goulart leaders singled him out—the US ambassador—as a nefarious influence in Brazilian politics.<sup>8</sup>

“Do you see a situation coming where we might be—find it desirable to intervene militarily ourselves?” President Kennedy asked his advisors on October 7, 1963. Gordon told the president such an intervention would demand a “massive military operation,” but reassured him that a plan was under development involving people in Rio de Janeiro, Washington, and Panama, the base for the Southern Command of the US Army (critical documents pertaining to it remain closed off to public consultation).<sup>9</sup> In the end, reflected Gordon, the evolution of Brazil’s crisis would depend on whether the military was ready to act. He feared civil war.<sup>10</sup> In Brazil, opposition to Goulart gathered momentum,

---

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

encompassing the National Confederation of Industry and the São Paulo Federation of Industries, both of which had originally backed the Three-Year Plan. Efforts to destabilize the Goulart administration spread across vast sections of Brazilian society. The president became increasingly isolated from his own party, where leaders began to fear the potential repressive measures coming from the military, while parties in opposition to Goulart were rapidly moving to the Right and into the arms of the top-ranking officers in the armed forces. At this point, businessmen, top-ranking military officers, and influencers across the board were actively conspiring to overthrow the president. If the coup came, it would be the product of both civilian and military activity.

On Friday, March 13, 1964, Goulart made a decisive bid to break the stalemate by turning toward the more radical forces in favor of reforms at a massive rally of well over 150,000 people—some were waving red communist flags—that was televised nationwide. Standing on a podium with his PTB ministers, the leaders of CGT, the UNE, and the communist party, the president called for radical change. There and then he signed a decree establishing the compulsory expropriation of rural properties of more than 500 hectares within ten kilometers of federal roads and railways, and properties of more than 30 hectares alongside government-financed dams—without cash compensation. A second decree expropriated the remaining private oil refineries not in the hands of oil giant Petrobras. The president denounced Congress as “archaic,” while promising to institute regular plebiscites, increase the minimum wage, and grant the vote to illiterates. Governor Brizola in his turn promised a “popular congress” for workers, peasants, and soldiers. The president insisted on his reformist agenda two days later, during his annual Message to Congress.

The backlash was immediate. On March 19, an anti-Goulart rally in São Paulo drew over 300,000 people under the banner of *Marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade* (Family’s Rally with God for Freedom). The following day, Lyndon B. Johnson, who had taken office after Kennedy’s assassination in late November, called for a briefing at the White House. In that meeting the American president authorized preparations for a naval task force to Brazil to “show the flag,” to evacuate US personnel, and to support the anti-Goulart forces in case of conflagration, civil war, and prolonged conflict. Seven to eight vessels, including oil tankers, would sail to the coast of Brazil. Operation Brother Sam, as it came to be known, made no provision for troops, arms, or ammunition—it was not designed for a military intervention. Meanwhile, back in Brazil, Army Chief of Staff Humberto Castello Branco issued a letter to the military command warning of an impending “institutional rupture” that might require intervention.<sup>11</sup> Five days later, when Goulart condoned a mutiny of protesting sailors and marines—and sacked the chief of the navy, appointing a successor nominated by the CGT—the military chiefs went for the chase. On March 27, Gordon warned the Johnson administration that failure to act in support of the military “might make Brazil the China of the 1960s.” The ambassador recommended the naval task force include arms and ammunition (but no troops).<sup>12</sup>

### Activating Brother Sam

On March 30, Goulart attended a meeting with sergeants at the Automóvel Club do Brasil to give yet another speech for radical reform against the advice of his military chief of staff, his chief whip at the Chamber of Deputies, and his press secretary. That evening, Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned President Johnson that the crisis was going to peak in the next day or so, possibly as early as the following morning. Less than 24 hours later, the general commander of the Fourth Infantry Division in Minas Gerais ordered 4,000 troops to march toward the capital. This action, however, was not part of a well-planned coup. Army Chief of Staff Humberto Castello Branco, for instance, had not been informed in advance of the uprising and was utterly confused. While the First Army adhered to the rebels, nobody knew for sure what would be of the Second, Third, and Fourth Armies. Walters cabled Washington at 7:05 p.m. to say, "The democratic forces (sic) are in serious danger."<sup>13</sup> The CIA worried about a military revolt ("The revolution will not be decided rapidly and will be bloody"). At 10:00 p.m., Goulart heard from two close allies in the army that he should publicly break with the Left, reshuffle the cabinet to purge members of the Left, and declare himself against the CGT. But it was too late. Capitulation at this stage, reflected Goulart, would render him a mere *presidente decorativo*.<sup>14</sup>

On the morning of March 31, speaking on the phone at his ranch in Texas, President Johnson was told that the coup against Goulart had begun but nobody knew how or when it would end. After the briefing, the president concluded by saying, "I think that we ought to take every step that we can." "Be prepared to do everything that we need to do, as we were in Panama, if that is at all feasible . . . I'd put everybody there, anyone that has any imagination or ingenuity . . . we just can't take this one and I'd get right on top of it and stick my neck out a little."<sup>15</sup> Johnson gave orders to put Operation Brother Sam into action. At 1:30 p.m. on March 31, only a few hours after the coup had begun, a fleet led by the aircraft carrier USS *Forrestal*, transporting more than 100 tons of arms and ammunition and including four tankers with half a million barrels of fuel, left Aruba in Puerto Rico bound for Santos, with an expected arrival date of April 11. Within hours, the Fourth Army joined the movement against the president. On the morning of April 1, Gordon cabled Washington that the revolt was "95 percent victorious."<sup>16</sup> The following day, Goulart fell without civilian resistance or military confrontation. Political, business, and religious leaders rushed to support the Right's "Revolution," with mass rallies in support of the president nowhere to be seen. The heads of the three military forces established a "Supreme Command of the Revolution," and Brazil embarked upon a path of authoritarian rule for the next two decades. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was ready to ship additional arms and ammunition within sixteen hours, but there was no need because the threat of civil war never materialized. At midday on April 2, Operation Brother Sam was deactivated, and the US government rushed to recognize the new dictatorial government of Brazil.<sup>17</sup> Two days later, Goulart fled into exile abroad, where he remained for the rest of his life. "Well," said Bobby Kennedy later on, "Goulart got what

was coming to him. Too bad he didn't follow the advice we gave him when I was down there."<sup>18</sup>

### Discussion of the Literature

Scholarly work on the role of the United States in the 1964 coup can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the impending clash between the Kennedy administration and Goulart was inevitable, given the opposition between US capitalist interests and the progressive nationalist agenda put forward by the PTB and its leader. On this view, Kennedy turned against his Brazilian colleague as early as 1962, and whatever outreach on the part of the White House was doomed to failure.<sup>19</sup> A second body of work takes a more nuanced view, drawing more explicitly on the wealth of primary sources that show the degree to which the United States weighed alternative political, economic, and diplomatic options as the Brazilian crisis unfolded.<sup>20</sup> Here the recurring argument is that American support for the coup was not preordained, and Washington may have been content to live with a more pliant Goulart. "U.S. officials might have accepted President Goulart seeing out his term if, for example, he had complied with their demands to remove leftists from his government and adjust his economic policies in favor of U.S. economic interests."<sup>21</sup> This reading is consistent with the best literature on the domestic politics of Goulart's deposition, which emphasizes the role of agency and choice amidst turmoil.<sup>22</sup>

Several issues stand out in the empirical literature on the role of the United States in the 1964 coup that should be further addressed by scholars. First is the need for more extensive and systematic data collection efforts to obtain a detailed picture of the degree to which coup plotters in the military indeed felt reassured in their ambitions by the United States. Perceptions among coup perpetrators of their external security environment remain largely unknown, and there is no sound evidentiary base to pin down the precise role that Washington played in shaping military calculations. Also, we know little about how officers processed the information they saw coming from their US interlocutors, and the degree to which reassurance from President Johnson convinced them to overthrow Goulart. Furthermore, there is the issue of private US companies operating in Brazil: did they lobby Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in any clear direction? To be sure, the government of the United States affected the calculations of Brazilian actors by their targeted actions and policies. Playing economic hardball surely increased the likelihood of the coup by deteriorating the economy and causing additional instability, but did US policy also shift the long-term calculations of the coup plotters? More empirical work is needed to uncover the specific links between economic pressure and coup activity.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the external sources of leader insecurity remain underexplored: did Goulart understand that President Kennedy was seriously weighing alternative scenarios and was

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

willing to give him the benefit of the doubt before moving to oppose him? Did he think he could survive politically against overt American opposition?

Third, disagreement exists in the literature about the degree to which the US government planned for military operations in case of a breakdown in Brazil. Was military planning limited to Operation Brother Sam—the naval task force that eventually sailed down to Brazil as the coup unfolded—or was there more to the utterance by Ambassador Gordon to President Johnson on military planning activity conducted at SOUTHCOM?

Fourth, if the armed forces were tasked with protecting any Brazilian government, but they also carried the potential to become a threat to the very government that they were intended to guard—a dynamic known in the literature as the “guardianship dilemma”—how far did Goulart go in practice in implementing a strategy of “coup proofing”? We now know that he lost control of the military, but there is a story to be told about the lengths he traveled to ensure men in uniform would not depose him.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to those questions, the coup of 1964 elicits at least two counterfactual problems. It is now well established that Bobby Kennedy played a pivotal role in the administration’s move toward a tougher stance against Goulart, as well as the move toward supporting the forces that ended up changing the regime. Is it plausible to argue that a similar outcome would have ensued in the absence of the US attorney general from the scene? Also, we now know that the pace of the coup rendered US direct military participation unnecessary. But how far would President Johnson have gone in support of the coup plotters in an alternative scenario of civil conflict in April 1964?

### Primary Sources

The role of the United States in the end of Brazil’s democratic cycle in 1964 can be explored in a wide variety of archival holdings. In the United States, the single most valuable resource is the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston. For material on Brazil, see the **President's Office Files** and the **National Security Files**. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon’s **Personal Papers** encompass twenty-seven boxes and a long **Oral History Interview** conducted in Rio de Janeiro two months after the coup. There are materials pertaining to Brazil in the **Robert F. Kennedy Attorney General Papers** and the **Alliance for Progress**. There are nine entries on Brazil in the library’s **audio**, **photograph**, and **film** collections. The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library in Austin holds several **digitized** documents on Brazil and eighteen oral histories, including the transcription of a 64-page interview with **former Ambassador Lincoln Gordon** conducted in 1969. Other relevant materials can be accessed in the Reading Room in Austin and are listed in **this guide**. At George Washington University, **The National Security Archive** makes relevant documents available through its **Brazil Project** initiative. **The CIA Records Search Tool (CREST)** grants access to **thirty-six relevant documents** on the run up to the coup, including memoranda, reports, and presidential

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

briefings released in 2015. Equally relevant is the evolution of CIA Estimates on Brazil in **March 1962, February, July, and October 1963**. Daily reports on Brazil from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) are available in full-searchable format via **Readex**.

In Brazil, access to information on the coup and its aftermath remains open to dispute to this date. In 2006 and 2017, the Supreme Court established that all such materials ought to be made available to the public upon request, but the Armed Forces normally reply that documents were destroyed in the mid-1970s upon instruction from the military commanders, a claim that is contradicted by the Comissão de Mortos e Desaparecidos (Commission of Deaths and Disappearances).<sup>25</sup> This said, students of that period will profit from the **National Archive** in Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, which includes vast amounts of materials from *Agência Nacional* (the official news agency), *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais* (an anti-Goulart advocacy institute), *Campanha da Mulher pela Democracia* (an anticommunist league with an anti-Goulart agenda), *Política Operária* (a self-declared Marxist revolutionary movement that is pro-Goulart), *Estado-Maior das Forças Armadas* (The Brazilian Joint Chiefs of Staff), *Conselho de Segurança Nacional* (National Security Council), *Divisão de Segurança e Informações do Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (Security and Information Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as the private papers of João Goulart, San Tiago Dantas, and communist leader Luiz Carlos Prestes. The quality of the organization of these collections is uneven, but a detailed list of materials can be found **here**. Also useful is the National Archive's project "**Memórias Reveladas**", which lists key collections and archives across Brazil on the 1964 coup and the military regime that ensued.

The archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasília holds diplomatic correspondence and documentation from 1959 onward (visitors need to **submit a request in writing**). The **Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional** grants internet access to 173 journals, newspapers, and other publications from the 1960s, including leading newspapers such as *Correio da Manhã*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Última Hora*, *Tribuna de Imprensa*, *Correio Braziliense*, as well as magazines *Realidade* and *O Cruzeiro*. Furthermore, students of this period can access the online collections of influential newspapers ***Folha de S. Paulo***, ***Estado de S. Paulo***, and weekly magazine ***Veja***. The Fundação Getúlio Vargas holds the largest repository of private papers, including some **200 collections**, a large part of which is available online through the **Accessus** database. The foundation's Center for Historical Research on Contemporary Brazil (CPDOC) also maintains an **Oral History Program** of some 5,000 hours of recorded interviews—half of which are available online. The center edits Brazil's historical-biographical dictionary—***Dicionário Histórico-Biográfico Brasileiro***, with dedicated entries such as s.v. "**Revolução de 1964**," s.v. "**Goulart, João**," s.v. "**Brizola, Leonel**," s.v. "**Campos, Roberto**," and s.v. "**Dantas, San Tiago**." Students of the period will profit from ***Visões do Golpe: A Memória Militar Sobre 1964*** (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1994), an edited volume by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares, and Celso Castro, with detailed interviews of twelve military chiefs who played a key role in the overthrow of Goulart. Brazil's **National Truth Commission** secured support from the Obama Administration to access **694 digitized documents** on Brazil's dictatorial

---

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

regime. Although just five of the documents in the collection pertain to the period in the run up to the coup, students will find the collection useful to put the fall of Goulart in historical perspective.

“**O Dia que Durou 21 Anos**” (Camilo Tavares, 2012) is an award-winning documentary film on the coup. The TV show “At Issue” on National Educational Television aired the series *Mr. Ambassador*, with a focus on Lincoln Gordon’s tenure at the US Embassy in Brazil in parts **1**, **2**, and **3**.

### Further Reading

Azevedo, Cecilia. *Em nome da América: os Corpos da Paz no Brasil*. São Paulo, Brazil: Alameda, 2008.

Bethell, Leslie, ed. *The Cambridge History of Latin America*. Vol. 9. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Cheibub Figueiredo, Argelina. *Democracia ou Reformas? Alternativas democráticas à crise política: 1961-1964*. São Paulo, Brazil: Editora Paz e Terra, 1993.

Fares, Seme Taleb. “Esperança e Medo: a Guerra Fria e as relações Brasil-Estados Unidos no Congresso Nacional (1961-1964).” PhD diss., Universidade de Brasília, 2014.

Ferreira, Jorge. *João Goulart. Uma Biografia*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2011.

Fico, Carlos. *O Grande Irmão*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Civilização Brasileira, 2008.

Fico, Carlos. *O golpe de 1964: momentos decisivos*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editora FGV, 2014.

Freire, Américo, and Jorge Ferreira, eds. *A Razão Indignada: Leonel Brizola em Dois Tempos, 1961-1964 e 1979-2004*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Civilização Brasileira, 2016.

Gaspari, Elio, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*. São Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 2002.

Gomes, Angela Maria de Castro, and Jorge Ferreira. *1964: O Golpe Que Derrubou Um Presidente, Pós Fim Ao Regime Democrático e Instituiu a Ditadura No Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Civilização Brasileira, 2014.

Green, James N., and Abigail Jones. “Reinventing History: Lincoln Gordon and His Multiple Versions of 1964.” *Revista Brasileira de História* 29, no. 57 (2009): 67-89.

Green, James N. *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Hershberg, James. “A ‘Friend of the Revolution’ or a ‘Traitor’? Vasco Tristão Leitão Da Cunha, Fidel Castro (and His Sister), and Brazilian-Cuban Relations, 1956-1964.” Paper

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

presented at the FLACSO-ISA Joint International Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 23–25, 2014.

Kirkendall, Andrew J. *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 28–60. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Leacock, Ruth. *Requiem for Revolution: The United States and Brazil, 1961–1969*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990.

Loureiro, Felipe P. *Empresários, trabalhadores e grupos de interesse: a política econômica nos governos Jânio Quadros e João Goulart, 1961–1964*. São Paulo, Brazil: UNESP, 2017.

Loureiro, Felipe P. “The Alliance for Progress and President João Goulart’s Three-Year Plan: The Deterioration of U.S.-Brazilian Relations in Cold War Brazil (1962).” *Cold War History* 17, no. 1 (2017): 61–79.

Loureiro, Felipe P. “Dois pesos, duas medidas: os acordos financeiros de maio de 1961 entre Brasil e Estados Unidos durante os governos Jânio Quadros e João Goulart (1961–1962).” *Economia e Sociedade* 22, no. 2 (2013): 547–576.

Parker, Phyllis R. *Brazil and the Quiet Intervention, 1964*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Pereira, Anthony. “The U.S. Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A Reassessment.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (June 2016).

Rabe, Stephen G. *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Rabe, Stephen G. *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Reis, Daniel Aarão, Marcelo Ridenti, and Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta. *A Ditadura Que Mudou O Brasil: 50 Anos Do Golpe de 1964*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Zahar, 2014.

Santomauro, Fernando. “A United States Information Agency e sua ação no Brasil de 1953 a 1964.” PhD diss., Programa San Tiago Dantas: Unesp, Unicamp e PUC-SP, 2015.

Serra, José. *Cinquenta Anos Esta Noite*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Record, 2014.

Setemy, Adrianna Cristina Lopes. “Sentinelas das Fronteiras: O Itamaraty e a Diplomacia Brasileira Na Produção de Informações Para O Combate Ao Inimigo Comunista (1935–1966).” PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2013.

Smith, Bruce L. R. *Lincoln Gordon: Architect of Cold War Foreign Policy*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015.

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

Spohr, Martina. "'American Way of Business': Empresariado Brasileiro e Norte-Americano No Caminho do Golpe Empresarial-Militar de 1964." PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2016.

Tota, Antonio Pedro. *O amigo americano: Nelson Rockefeller e o Brasil*. São Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 2014.

Walters, Vernon. *Missões silenciosas*. Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército, 1986.

Weis, Michael. *Cold Warriors and Coups d'état: Brazilian-American Relations, 1945-1964*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

### Notes:

(1.) Gordon, memorandum, Points Supplementary to R. N. Goodwin draft of January 1, 1962, National Security Files: Country: Brazil, John F. Kennedy Library.

(2.) For insight on the domestic politics behind Kennedy's Brazil policy, see Anthony Pereira, "The U.S. Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A Reassessment," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (June 2016).

(3.) White House, Transcript of meeting between President Kennedy, US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon, and NSC Director Richard Goodwin, July 30, 1962. In Timothy Naftali, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Vol. 1, July 30-August, 1962* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 5-25.

(4.) Bethell, Leslie, ed. *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 153.

(5.) US Embassy in Rio de Janeiro, Airgram A-710, Minutes of conversation between Brazilian President Joao Goulart and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Brasilia, December 17, 1962, 1-17.

(6.) From White House, Excerpts from John F. Kennedy's conversation regarding Brazil with US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon on Friday March 8, 1963, Meeting 77.1. President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, 7-9.

(7.) Ambassador Lincoln Gordon to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, August 21, 1963, no. 373, Brazil: August 1963. National Security File, John F. Kennedy Library.

(8.) Thomas L. Hughes to Mr. Martin, "INR Comments on Embassy Rio Telegram 373 Concerning the Brazilian Political Situation," August 29, 1963, Brazil Security 1963, Presidential Files, John F. Kennedy Library. See also Central Intelligence Agency. Current Intelligence Memorandum: The Situation and Outlook in Brazil. Office of Current Intelligence. Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, General CIA Records. CIA-RDP79T00429A001200010017-8. July 15, 1963.

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

(9.) Existing literatures disagree on this operation. Fico (Fico, Carlos, *O golpe de 1964: momentos decisivos*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2014) sees it as part and parcel of Operation Brother Sam, the naval task force the United States sent in support for the coup in early April 1964. Pereira (Pereira, Anthony, "The U.S. Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A Reassessment." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* June 2016) sees it as an entirely different operation.

(10.) From White House, Excerpts from John F. Kennedy's conversation regarding Brazil with US Ambassador Lincoln Gordon on Monday, October 7, 1963, Tape 114/A50, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, 7-8.

(11.) Gaspari, Elio, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002, 55. See Internal Defense Plan for Brazil. March 20, 1964. Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 1942. National Archives and Records Administration.

(12.) Personal from Ambassador Gordon, March 27, 1964, National Security Files: Country: Brazil, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

(13.) Gaspari, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*, 79.

(14.) Gaspari, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*, 87.

(15.) From White House audio tape, President Lyndon Johnson discussing the impending coup in Brazil with Undersecretary of State George Ball, March 31, 1964.

(16.) Gaspari, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*, 109.

(17.) Fico, Carlos, *O Grande Irmão* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008), 102; Leacock, Ruth, *Requiem for Revolution: The United States and Brazil, 1961-1969* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990).

(18.) A. J. Languth, *Hidden Terrors: The Truth about U.S. Police Operations in Latin America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 116. Quoted in Pereira (2016), 11.

(19.) Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, *O Governo João Goulart: as lutas sociais no Brasil 1961-1964* (Brasília: Editora Revan/Editora UnB, 2001 [1978]); José Paulo Netto, *Pequena história da ditadura brasileira* (São Paulo: Cortez, 2014); Flavio Tavares, *1964: O Golpe* (Porto Alegre: L&PM, 2015).

(20.) Pereira (2016); Fico (2014); Felipe P. Loureiro, "The Alliance for Progress and President João Goulart's Three-Year Plan: The Deterioration of U.S.-Brazilian Relations in Cold War Brazil (1962)," *Cold War History* 17, no. 1 (2017): 61-79. Felipe Pereira Loureiro, "Dois pesos, duas medidas: os acordos financeiros de maio de 1961 entre Brasil e Estados Unidos durante os governos Jânio Quadros e João Goulart (1961-1962)," *Economia e Sociedade* 22, no. 2 (2013): 547-576.

## The United States and the 1964 Brazilian Military Coup

---

(21.) Pereira (2016), 12.

(22.) Argelina Cheibub Figueiredo, *Democracia ou Reformas? Alternativas democráticas à crise política: 1961–1964* (São Paulo: Editora Paz e Terra, 1993).

(23.) Clayton L. Tyne, “Supporter of Stability or Agent of Agitation? The Effect of United States Foreign Policy on Coups in Latin America, 1960–1999.” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 4 (2010): 449–461.

(24.) Blake McMahon and Branislav Slantchev, “The Guardianship Dilemma: Regime Security through and from the Armed Forces.” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (May 2015): 297–313.

(25.) For a summary debate, see Lucas Figueiredo, “Lugar Nenhum—Militares e Civis na Ocultação dos Documentos da Ditadura.” *Blog do Lucas Figueiredo*, September 27, 2015, <https://lfigueiredo.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/saiu-o-livro-novo-lugar-nenhum-militares-e-civis-na-ocultacao-dos-documentos-da-ditadura/>.

### **Matias Spektor**

Center for International Relations, Fundação Getúlio Vargas

