

The military coup in brazil in 1964 history essay



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This is a study into the way in which the military coup in Brazil in 1964 mirrored the dilemmas and fears of American foreign policy during the Cold War years. It is a view of the American foreign policy's difficulties in dealing with the perceived threat of communism; a perceived threat that was brought about by tensions resulting from the Cold War after World War II. This study looks into Brazil's domestic policy in the years of the Cold War and how the internal turmoil culminated in a military coup in 1964 that was influenced by the Cold War tensions. The coup in Brazil was military in nature, and a military dictatorship with a deep hatred of communism ruled for the next 21 years and was supported by the American government. It is imperative to note that Brazil's case was not singular - the United States often had to make compromise its allegiance to democracy in an attempt to contain communism. For this reason, it is not only a worthy topic to explore, but also has international ties and adds to a global understanding of international comparative politics.

World War II, The Cold War, and the threat of communism

The victory of the allied coalition at World War II did not end all tensions that had plagued the international scenario of the first half of the 20th century. The US emerged from World War II as a main world power; having joined the war at its end, the US did not suffer the war's effects to the same extent as Europe. The US did not have as many casualties, there were no destroyed American cities, and the country's social fiber did not experience the same demoralizing blows that affected Europe. The war effort had been fuelled to a considerable extent by American industries and agriculture and this provided a long lasting boost to the American economy. The prevailing

perception in the Western front was that the military victory, together with the economic gains, should entail the continuation of world political supremacy, as well as the prevalence of their ideals of democracy and a capitalist economy (The Cold War).

However, one of the allies did not share the same ideas. Since the Communist Revolution in 1917, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had been engaged in the construction of communism, a political ideology that clashes head on with capitalism. Whereas capitalism supports a free market and relies on the ingenuity of the individuals as the main factor of economic prosperity, soviet communism required that all economic factors should be under state surveillance, foreign industries and banks be nationalized, and that trade and agriculture fall under the guidance of trade unions. The USSR contributed decisively in the war against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Well over 20 million Russian men and women were killed, many of them civilian. In fact, the Soviets considered that they had contributed more than the Americans did, and consequently demanded larger compensations for their military efforts (The Cold War).

The US and its Western European allies reacted with growing concern to the perceived Soviet threat. To stall Soviet expansionism, many areas of the world were considered as under direct American ' hold' or ' spheres of influence'. Latin America fit in this category. When Fidel Castro ousted the government of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in January 1959 and progressively moved towards a single party regime, self-declaring itself a socialist republic, tensions heightened (The Cold War). Cuban families who had their businesses nationalized or simply confiscated migrated to Florida and began <https://assignbuster.com/the-military-coup-in-brazil-in-1964-history-essay/>

to actively oppose any diplomatic compromise with Fidel's regime. Soon Cuba gravitated towards the soviet orbit of influence, and tensions escalated. When the USSR placed missiles in Cuban territory in 1962, US President John Kennedy threatened Nikita Krustchev with military retaliation in the form of nuclear weapons. The world, and the Latin American region in particular, experienced a critical stage of alarm. Nikita Kruschev, then Premier of the USSR, withdrew the missiles and the crisis subdued, but it was clear that the so-called Cold War between the two extremes of international power was there to stay (The Cold War).

Brazil and the Cold War

From the Brazilian perspective, the years that immediately followed World War II had been a period of relative economic prosperity. Brazil had had the opportunity to export raw materials and to enter a stage of rapid industrialization, based on the principle of import substitution - that is, the government encouraged economic sectors to develop products that would otherwise be imported. Not unlike other industrializing countries in history, the emergence of new industries therefore strengthened the role of labor unions, which soon requested social benefits and reforms. As always in Brazil's history, European ideas were treated with importance and discussed vigorously. The clash between American capitalism and Soviet communism engendered heated debates (Stepan).

There were three major political parties in Brazil at the time. The União Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Union - UDN, in the Portuguese initials), was linked to the incipient middle class, and represented the

traditional values of the country's 'old' money. This party was conservative in nature and generally considered as the right wing in Brazilian politics. Conversely, the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro, (Brazilian Workers Party - PTB), was on the left wing. Mainly integrated by trade union members, this party interested itself in social reforms that would, at least in theory, attempt to extend certain benefits enjoyed by the rich to the poorer segments of the Brazilian population. It was not an entirely socialist party, but was definitely considered on the left. The Partido Social-Democrático (Social-Democratic Party - PSD), was the largest party of all. PSD tried to provide the middle ground between the two extremes of the other political parties. It was a central party with a great amount of influence (Skidmore).

It is important to note that the Brazilian population was mostly rural and agriculturally based at the time (Skidmore). Thus, many of the rural leaders wanted the benefits enjoyed by the urban workers extended to the countryside. Against the prevailing background of capitalist versus communist tensions, this sounded to many people's ears as dangerously communist and consequently revolutionary. The cold war rhetoric strengthened the perception that workers' demand was excessive and contrary to society's best interests.

Brazil's internal political structure

In 1955, Juscelino Kubitschek was elected President of Brazil with the pro-development slogan "50 years in 5". To keep his campaign promise, the plan was to move the capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia, in order to bring economic prosperity to the Brazilian heartland, a huge area mostly neglected

until then (Gaspari). Kubitschek's presidency had a profound impact in all sectors of the Brazilian society. When he left the government in 1960, right after the formal inauguration of the new capital, the country experienced one of the most exciting phases of its entire history. The fifties became known as the 'golden years'. Brazil was then undergoing a spurt of economic growth with widespread reflections. The national team had won the World Cup in 1958, a new musical beat, the bossa nova, was becoming popular in the whole world, literary classics were being published, a promising movie industry released a series of national hits, while an unprecedented wave of optimism prevailed throughout the entire nation. But there were signs of political turmoil beneath the rosy surface (Gaspari).

On the one hand, the creation of Brasilia generated millions of jobs, stimulated many industrial sectors and created a number of new important industries, such as the automotive one. On the other hand, however, it also brought many imbalances to the economic and political scene. The cost of moving the political centre to a new area and financing the construction of a brand new city subjected the economy to unprecedented pressure, generating problems such as federal debt and inflation. The economic prosperity of the cities had enlarged the urban populations. Although this brought an increase in labor union membership, their leaders were somehow obedient to the political guidelines of the PSD-PTB coalition put together by Kubitschek (Gaspari). But populist politicians were prepared to promise the urban masses a larger share in economic prosperity. Their language often implied radical changes in the political power structure. The Kubitschek presidency also witnessed the beginnings of political radicalization in the

countryside. Taken together, the signs of awakening mass politics in the urban and rural sectors were bound to frighten those groups which had most to lose if the power equilibrium should be disturbed by the populist left-wing politicians: the rural landowners, never before threatened; the urban middle class, still linked by many personal ties to the rural landowners and deeply uncertain over their future status in a period of rapid change; and the military officer class, whose distaste for populism stemmed partly from their own disagreements over the proper strategy for Brazil's economic development (Stepan).

Brazil: communist or independent?

It was in this effervescent political scene that Janio Quadros was elected president in 1960 (Gaspari). Quadros was a populist newcomer from Sao Paulo, the most industrialized state of the country. He rose to the presidency on a coalition led by UDN and a number of smaller parties (Gaspari). In the economic sphere, Quadros hoped to ease Brazil's financial ills by simultaneous negotiations with three power centers: the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet bloc. But it was an awkward moment to launch an independent policy in the western hemisphere. The Cold War had become hot in the Caribbean, where the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion made the US government, under President John Kennedy, all the more intent upon ensuring the diplomatic isolation of Cuba. From the Kennedy administration standpoint, there remained a question: why would Brazil pursue a quixotic policy towards the communist world? (Stepan)

On the Brazilian front, however, many influent leaders considered an independent foreign policy as a natural consequence of a post-Brasilia assertiveness. A number of diplomatic initiatives underlined this new assertiveness: Brazil supported the United Nations debate over the seating of communist China, and announced that a resumption of relations with the Soviet Union (severed since 1947) was under study. These political gestures were not well received in Washington. The situation became intolerable after the President's decision to award the Cruzeiro do Sul Cross, Brazil's most prestigious political award, to Cuba's Che Guevara. For the first time in the Brazilian modern history, a foreign policy question originated a controversy that would only end when Janio Quadros, on August 25, 1961, submitted his resignation to the Congress (Walters).

The Brazilian constitution at that time established that the President and the Vice-President were elected in two separate elections. Quadros' vice-president was João Goulart, the top leader of the PTB party (Celso). Goulart was closely linked to labor unions, and was considered in conservative sectors of the Brazilian elite as cryptically communist. Quadros' eventual resignation caught the population by surprise and unsettled those political leaders who did not accept the idea of having the leader of PTB as president of the country. Political and military leaders declared that should Goulart be named president, the country would be "on the road to civil war" (Celso). Finally, a compromise was reached: Congress voted an amendment to the constitution and the country became a parliamentary democracy, with Goulart as president, and the Speaker of the Senate as Prime Minister. As such, Goulart would be figuratively the head of state, but with limited

powers. Later, however, a national referendum reinstated his full presidential powers. This only prolonged the deadlock (Celso).

The US government was paying close attention to political developments in all South America, and particularly to Brazil. Immediately after Quadros resigned, the U. S was reported to have a navy fleet ready to depart in Brazil and resist any communist force present in Brazil (Gaspari). Furthermore, American president President Lyndon B. Johnson urged taking “ every step that [the U. S] can” to support the overthrow of João Goulart and helping the Brazilian military authorities against Goulart’s “ left-wing” government (Gaspari). Thomas Mann was Johnson’s advisor on Latin American affairs. Mann consolidated what became known as the Mann Doctrine, a plan that essentially aimed to influence Latin America against the Soviet Union – in a nutshell, “ no more Cubas” (The Cold War). It was this Mann Doctrine that allowed the U. S government to “[approve] and [support]” the military coup against Goulart simply because he was a “ nationalist reformer who favored good relations with Castro and wanted to limit U. S corporate remittances” (The Cold War). It is also known today that the American Embassy in Brazil developed close links with the political leaders who opposed Goulart, and encouraged the military to take a stand against his presidency (Walters). American interference in Brazilian domestic affairs was a direct consequence of the Cold War and the political perception of the time. It would be unthinkable that Brazil might follow Cuba’s footsteps. In such a case, the US would suffer a blow, as if it had lost a “ battle” in the Cold War.

Goulart’s government was thus in serious trouble. The role of foreign capital and the question of land structures were emotionally discussed, while the

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perennial problems of inflation and deficits in the balance of payments offered ready arguments to political radicalizers of both right and left. To complicate matters even further, there were deep political disagreements within the military. There were clear signs that normal constitutional processes could fail in Brazil (Gaspari).

The coup d'état

General Olímpio Mourão Filho, who was a Commander of the Brazilian army, ordered his troops to start moving towards Rio de Janeiro during the night on March 31, 1964. The coup began in Rio because that was where he predicted the army would remain loyal to the current Goulart government (Gaspari). This news reached Goulart, who was in bed at the time. His decision was to leave Brasília and flee the country. Goulart had explicitly fled the role of presidency, leaving the country open for anyone to take the position. On April 11th, just 11 days after the troops occupied Rio de Janeiro, General Humberto Castello Branco was elected as president by Congress and the coup d'état had been successful. The American government quickly retaliated by formally supporting the new Brazilian government. This declaration made it clear to the entire world which side the United States was on (Gaspari).

Nine days after, on April 20th, this so-called Supreme Revolutionary Command, composed of the commanders-in-chief of the three military services, unilaterally issued the First Institutional Act. This act stated that the military had “deposed the previous government and had the capacity to form a new government”. It went on to say that the “revolution” did not

seek to legitimize itself through Congress because “ the revolution legitimizes itself” (Gaspari). Under the authority it had decreed itself by this Act, the Supreme revolutionary Command took the first of what were to be many steps to purge the political system. On April 10, it issued a list cancelling the mandates of 100 politicians, trade union officials, intellectuals, and other political actors (Gaspari). The military detained the government for the 21 subsequent years. It is interesting to note that the coup was declared in an attempt to contain the perceived communist threat of Goulart and his independent foreign policies. The act had been supported by the epitome of democracy, the United States. The Supreme Revolutionary command, however, in essence is abolishing democracy. It is not an elected body representative of the country, and instead a self-proclaimed legitimate government. This is where the root of the American contradiction in Brazil begins. The American government was forced to compromise their commitment to a democratic society in order to support the abolishment of communism. For the United States, the optimum government would be democratic and capitalist. However, in the event of having to choose between the political democratic system and the economic capitalist system, their support of the coup in Brazil makes it clear that it is more beneficial to support the economy of capitalism, because it clearly obliterates the core of the communist threat. The fact that in doing so might compromise democracy is a sacrifice that in Brazil in 1964 they were willing to make.

Was the United States responsible or just supportive?

What was the role of the United States in the political upheaval that shattered the democratic regime for over two decades, from 1964 to 1985?

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There are two opposed views in contention over this matter. The first holds that the US was the major force behind the military coup. This is, for instance, Edmar Morel's evaluation in a book whose title can be translated as "The coup began in Washington" (Edmar Morel, *O Golpe Começou em Washington*, Editora Civilização Brasileira). Morel argues that the US had changed its Latin American policy since its inception, in 1961, of the assistance program called Alliance for Progress, instituted by President John Kennedy. He sustains that Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann, in contrast to his predecessors, had adopted a policy that was more sympathetic to military governments in Latin America, replacing the ideals of social reform by a policy of obsessive anti-communism. At its most extreme, this explanation claims that the Brazilian conspirators who overthrew Goulart were acting under direct instructions from the US government (Gaspari).

The opposite view is condensed in the congressional testimony of the former American ambassador to Brazil, Lincoln Gordon: "The movement which overthrew President Goulart was a purely 100 percent - not 99.4 percent - purely Brazilian movement. Neither the American Embassy nor I personally played any part in the process whatsoever" (Gaspari).

American scholars who developed exhaustive research on Brazil contend, however, that the US did play a role in the boundary change. 'Brazilianists' like Alfred Stepan and Thomas E. Skidmore admit that US pressures were rendered more influential because, to a significant extent, American policies were congruent with and found reinforcement in some powerful conservative domestic political and military trends (Stepan). It can also be added that those trends in Brazil and the policies adopted by the US were highly

influenced by the international situation. In other words, the coup that shattered the democratic order in Brazil in 1964 was inevitably connected with the cold war between the US and the USSR. Stepan argues that the record is clear that it was Washington official policy to weaken the Goulart government and to strengthen the military government of General Castello Branco. He contends that, by mid-1963, the US government moved from a position of mild support to one of opposition to the Goulart regime. Political opponents of the president received preferential treatment, a policy that was known by State Department officials as one of strengthening 'islands of sanity' in Brazil (Stepan). Skidmore reminds us that one important fact brought about a similarity in aims and outlook between Brazilian officer corps and the military attachés to the American embassy, and that was the participation of Brazil in World War II (Skidmore). Brazil was the only country in Latin America to send ground combat troops to fight in the war, and a Brazilian Expeditionary Force of divisional strength fought in Italy as part of the US-commanded Fourth Corps. From this experience arose a whole set of personal friendships. An especially close tie existed between the operation officer for the Brazilian force, then Lieutenant Castello Branco, and the liaison officer between the US Fourth Corps and the Brazilian force, Vernon Walters. Years later, in 1964, Colonel (later promoted to General) Walters became an exceedingly knowledgeable liaison with the Brazilian officer corps. Skidmore also points out that, by early 1964, the US government had become preoccupied with the possibility of a sharp leftist turn in Brazil. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon later made no secret of his own belief that Goulart was on the verge of attempting a populist solution to the Brazilian cul-de-sac. According to Skidmore, this view was also held by Secretary of <https://assignbuster.com/the-military-coup-in-brazil-in-1964-history-essay/>

State Dean Rusk, who explained soon after the coup of 1964 that he had been concerned about leftist infiltration in the Goulart regime (Skidmore).

The American government made clear that it was delighted with Goulart's overthrow when President Lyndon Johnson, within hours after the Brazilian head of state left the presidential palace, made public a message on April 7th on the New York Times expressing " warmest good wishes" and stating that " the American people have watched with anxiety the political and economic difficulties through which your great nation has been passing, and have admired the resolute will of the Brazilian community to resolve these difficulties within a framework of constitutional democracy and without civil strife" (Gaspari). Arthur Krock, the New York Times columnist of conservative views, was dismayed at such a rapid recognition. On April 7, he stated, " another lesson of experience is that it is best to await the development of the policies of the new Latin American governments before praising them" (Gaspari). In retrospect, that was a good word of advice, considering the facts that led to the Institutional Acts of April 9 and those that followed over two and a half years. Born out of a military coup, the revolution of 1964 could not be contained within normal constitutional limits. During his ambassadorship in Brazil that lasted until early 1966, when he was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Lincoln Gordon continued to defend the Brazilian regime against its critics abroad. He expressed faith in the Castello Branco government's commitment to restore democratic procedures. He regarded the government as compatible with the principles of US-Latin American policy as outlined by President

Kennedy. Ambassador Gordon's attitude was fully endorsed in the policy statements and actions of official Washington (Walters).

For the US, the great size of Brazil contributed to a sort of 'attraction-fear relationship'. The fear, especially pronounced at the height of the cold war, was that since Brazil borders with every country in South America except Ecuador and Chile, a pro-communist Brazil would serve as a sanctuary and training ground for guerrilla operations throughout the sub-continent. The same strategic position of Brazil was later a point in favor of massive assistance to the military government in Brazil, for it could perform an anti-communist hegemonic role for the US in South America. The ally relationship between the US and Brazil contributed to another special feature in the military relations between the two countries. A US advisory mission helped in the establishment of the Brazilian War College, where, for many years, the only foreign country with a liaison officer with faculty status was, precisely, the US (Cardoso).

The evidence clearly suggests, therefore, that there was an unusually close relationship between the US government and the Brazilian military. Although it does not necessarily support the argument that the Brazilian military coup was orchestrated in Washington, some recently released data confirms, at least in part, that the events that led to João Goulart's demise were not contrary to Washington's wishes. That is what the records of President John Kennedy's conversations clearly show. John Kennedy was the first American President to record extensively his conversations at the Oval Office. In "The presidential recordings - John Kennedy", vol 1: July 30- August 1962, edited by Timothy Naftali, 28 minutes of a conversation between the President and <https://assignbuster.com/the-military-coup-in-brazil-in-1964-history-essay/>

Lincoln Gordon are reproduced. The ambassador tells Kennedy that a military coup was a possibility not to be dismissed. He conceded that the deposition of João Goulart was not the only strategy available, but he wanted to persuade the President that he should be allowed to keep that ace up his sleeve (Gaspari). The following dialogue is then registered:

Gordon - I believe that one of our most important tasks will be to reinforce the military connections. We must make it clear, although we must also be discreet, that we are not necessarily hostile to any kind of military action, as long as the motive is clear...

Kennedy - Against the left...

Gordon - He is delivering the country to...

Kennedy - The communists.

Gordon - Exactly. There is enough evidence that Goulart, against his will, or not, ...(inaudible).

Two days later, in a conversation with the assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Richard Goodwin, Kennedy comments: " The way things are going, in three more months the military might be the only thing we are left with... We might very well want them to take over before the end of the year, if they can" (Gaspari).

Conclusion

The years of the Cold War brought about a climate of dilemma for the American government. Their allegiance to the ideals and values of

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democracy intrinsically caused them to uphold these ideals and values all over the world. In relation to Brazil, the political structure there had significant importance to the United States because Brazil borders all of the other countries on the South American continent, and is thus very influential in that continent. In 1964, when a coup d'état was orchestrated in order to overthrow the perceived communist threat of Goulart, the United States supported it. It then becomes important to analyze just how involved the United States was in the military coup, and the evidence clearly suggests that there was a close relationship between them. In this way, then, the United States strongly supported the coup in 1964 in Brazil and thus the coup reflected the contradictory nature of the American foreign policy in the Cold War years. It is most important to note that this was not a unique experience; 1964 was just before the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, where Johnson and his successors faced similar dilemmas to their one in Brazil.