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by LADB Staff

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Brazil marked the 40th anniversary of the military coup that cast the country into a 15-year (1964-1979) nightmare. In the US, the National Security Archive (NSA) celebrated the event with the public disclosure of documents and audiotape attesting to Washington's support of the coup and readiness to lend the Brazilian military a helping hand with the destruction of its government.

In 1964, the US rationale for crushing governments was the Cold War, and Brazil's government was just one of several that fell to the rabid anti-communism emblematic of the era. Recalling those years for the press, then US ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon recently said, "We were working at a frenzied pace in those days to get Washington ready for whatever might happen. It was the height of the Cold War and Brazil was a major country in Latin America." Gordon set about getting Washington ready by sending a cable to the State Department on March 27, 1964, requesting a naval task force, fuel, and arms deliveries to "help avert a major disaster here."

The disaster Gordon had in mind was that the Joao Goulart government would turn communist, "which might make Brazil the China of the 1960s." The logic was that, without the timely intervention of the military, Goulart would become the equivalent of Mao Zedong. There was no equivalent of Chiang Kai-shek, and no Nationalists to drive into the sea to set up a Nationalist Brazil on the island of Fernando de Naronha. But even without an adversary, the CIA was sure the Brazilian military would need to sacrifice democracy to save the country.

A March 30 cable heralded a coup "within the next few days," but said, "The revolution will not be resolved quickly and will be bloody." The CIA was wrong on all counts. The coup started March 31 and was over by April 4. There was no blood shed, nor would there be until the torturers began in earnest some time later. Even then not much blood spilled; these were professional, trained torturers, able to exact maximal pain without making a mess.

"The CIA was probably harking back to events in 1961, when the military was deeply divided over the issue of Goulart assuming power. But just as there was no violence in 1961, there was none in 1964. It was a CIA miscalculation, not for the first time, and not for the last," said political scientist David Fleischer, a US national who teaches at the Universidade de Brasilia. He added, "These new documents serve to reinforce what is now a well-known tale. The US organized its support for the coup in an operation called Brother Sam. The task force ended up steaming toward the South Atlantic, but the aid was never needed. The coup ended quickly and without bloodshed."

As Gordon recalled events, and as a tape recording indicates, US President Lyndon Johnson wanted at the very least to support the coup. Johnson is heard to say at a briefing with his national security people, "I'd get right on top of it and stick my neck out a little." He told Undersecretary of State George Ball to "take every step we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do" to assist the Brazilian military. But for Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the Bay of Pigs fiasco still stung, and he
didn't want a repeat diplomatic-military catastrophe. Gordon said, "He [Rusk] wanted to make sure there was broad political support for the military before advising any intervention."

The military was not without support. Democracy in Brazil was less than perfect. Reforms that extended the vote to more than just a small segment of the population did not come until 1945, and full suffrage would come only decades later with the Constitution of 1985. Despite a good deal of grassroots Catholic support for Goulart, the conservative church with its fiercely anti-communist bishops opposed him and looked favorably upon the coup that ousted him.

Goulart was a progressive nationalist who came to the presidency in 1961 with ideas of land reform, education, and labor reform. He had been elected vice president in 1956, and assumed the presidency when President Janio Quadro resigned. A national plebiscite in 1963 handed him a resounding victory with a margin of four to one. But the protosocialist president with a taste for putting into practice the newly articulated tenets of liberation theology did not reckon with a US diplomat who was cabling his government recommendations "that measures be taken soonest to prepare for a clandestine delivery of arms of non-US origin, to be made available to Castillo Branco supporters in Sao Paulo," or that "weapons be prepositioned prior to the outbreak of violence," to be used by paramilitary units and "friendly military against hostile military if necessary." These quotes are from the NSA documents.

Historical research has shown that the "friendly military" would almost certainly have been led by Brazilian officers trained in the US. Of the core group of officers who formed the post-coup government, all had received training abroad, 80% in the US. That contrasts with 24% foreign training for officers not in that group. The cables show that Gordon was preparing not only for the coup but also for ideological help from the CIA "to help strengthen resistance forces." There would be "covert support for pro-democracy street rallies," and "encouragement of democratic and anti-communist sentiment in Congress, armed forces, friendly labor and student groups, church, and business."

The response in Washington to Gordon's recommendations was enthusiastic and immediate. A telegram from Rusk said a naval task force had been mobilized. He would get everything he asked for and more by air and sea. But all this largesse went for naught, because the CIA was wrong. The party started without it, and, on April 2, 1964, an unbowed CIA cabled Washington, "Joao Goulart, deposed president of Brazil, left Porto Alegre about 1 p.m. local time for Montevideo."

The newly revealed documents include:

White House audio tape President Lyndon B. Johnson discussing the upcoming coup with Undersecretary of State George Ball, March 31, 1064.

Top secret State Department cable from Rio de Janeiro, March 27, 1964.

Top secret State Department cable from Ambassador Lincoln Gordon, March 29, 1964.
CIA Intelligence Information Cable: Plans of Revolutionary Plotters in Minas Gerias (sic), March 30, 1964.


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