

Anticorruption and Imperialist Blind Spots: The Role of the United States in Brazil's Long Coup

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Abstract

A comprehensive examination of the evidence available, contained in U.S. government statements, English-language media accounts, and hacked Telegram chats among Brazilian prosecutors, indicates that the United States was closely involved in the "long coup" that removed the left from power in Brazil in 2016 and secured the election of the far-right in 2018. Just as after Brazil's U.S.-backed 1964 coup, this evidence has largely been ignored by U.S. scholars. Latin Americanists would do well to return to the anti-imperialist tradition that established our field as a leading critic of U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. Imperialism and Its Denialists in Historical Context: The 1964 Brazilian Coup

It should come as no surprise that U.S. media and many scholars have ignored (or applauded) U.S. involvement in the long coup. For over half a century, intervening against democratically elected governments has been only half the story; the second half involves justifying, minimizing, or denying U.S. involvement. Cold War justifications for U.S. intervention privileged anticommunism as the United States destabilized progressive governments, installed friendly dictators, funded brutal military regimes, and provided expert training in repression of leftist dissidents ([Livingstone, 2011](#): 2). As with recent interventions, such actions have generally only been belatedly, if ever, acknowledged by important sectors of U.S. journalism and academia.

In 1961, President Jânio Quadros resigned, leaving vice president João Goulart as his successor. The U.S. government disliked Goulart for his Cold War neutrality, land reform initiatives, 1962 profit remittance law, and promotion of industrial nationalization. By 1962,

John F. Kennedy and Ambassador Lincoln Gordon had decided that Goulart should be removed ([Green, 2010](#): 29). Key fronts in the crusade against Goulart included the Alliance for Progress ([Green, 2010](#): 6-27) and the American Institute for Free Labor Development, which worked to steer unions toward anticommunism ([Corrêa, 2021](#)). Meanwhile, CIA-produced propaganda portrayed an imminent communist takeover ([Black, 1977](#): 131). As [Phyllis Parker \(1979\)](#) revealed, the United States organized Operation Brother Sam, which positioned U.S. ships off Brazil's coast, ready to help the plotters if needed. The conspiracy involving the Kennedy administration, business interests, and right-wing Brazilian politicians and military officers came to fruition in 1964. During the two decades of military rule that followed, the United States remained allied with the Brazilian generals.

U.S. opposition to Goulart had little to do with communism; the financial and geopolitical interests that motivated the coup were apparent early on. Corporations had much to lose from Goulart's reforms. For example, in 1963 the Hanna Mining Company objected to Goulart's expropriation decree. Hanna board member, John J. McCloy, led Gordon to the office of Brazil's first military president, Humberto Castelo Branco, to explain that restoring Hanna's concession "might be a condition for receiving U.S. economic assistance" ([Black, 1977](#): 88). Financial motivations are further suggested by corporate responses to Senator Frank Church's hearings on U.S. support for torture in Brazil. Worried about exposure, U.S. corporations requested that congressional hearings be "closed and discreet" ([Green, 2010](#): 238-241).

All along, the U.S. government denied involvement, repeating the mantra that the coup had been a "revolution" preventing a fall to communism ([Green, 2010](#): 43). The U.S. media uncritically parroted this. Before the coup, the *New York Times's* Rio correspondent, Tad Szulc, warned against "rising Leftist influence" and supposed Marxist organization of peasants ([Green, 2010](#): 25). Meanwhile, the headline in *Life's* April 17, 1964, issue stated, "Arrested: A Big Yaw to the Left." The 23-page *Reader's Digest* screed by the noted anticommunist Clarence W. Hall, rife with undocumented claims, was made into a pamphlet with instructions for mailing abroad ([Hall, 1964](#)). [James Green \(2010\)](#): 39) calls it "almost a caricature of bad, early 1960s Cold War propaganda." [Michael Weis \(1997\)](#) concluded that "the U.S. government was able to manage the news to hide U.S. involvement in the coup and to present a skewed version of reality" that would soon justify coups across Latin America.

Despite overwhelming evidence uncovered by Brazilian and U.S. scholars, the record has barely been corrected. At the level of political and popular discourse, false narratives about the coup and military regime continue to mislead a public conditioned to interpret U.S. foreign policy positively. Furthermore, writers connected to the institutions crucial to narrative management—the U.S. military, intelligence agencies, the media, and Wall Street—are often responsible for what becomes "common knowledge" about Latin America ([Swart, 2022](#): 224-226). For example, entries about the coup in the 2008 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* read like Cold War propaganda. In the entry "Revolution of 1964," [Marshall C. Eakin \(2008\)](#) limits U.S. involvement to mere "support," repeating the pretext of U.S. concerns about "a leftist revolution." Lewis A. Tambs's entry on the regime's first dictator, Castelo Branco, limits U.S. relations with Brazil to "financial aid and investment." He states that the regime's series of repressive institutional acts "insured internal order" and "purified the government" ([2008](#): 14). Notably, Tambs cites John W. F. Dulles, son of John Foster Dulles and nephew of former CIA director Allen Dulles. Dulles's own entry on Luís Carlos Prestes faults "violence-minded

leftists” and the Brazilian Communist Party for the coup. [Dulles \(2008: 362–363\)](#) sneers at the existence of U.S. “imperialism” by putting it in scare quotes.

Recent textbooks have not done much better. Both *Latin America and the Caribbean* and *Latin America since Independence: A History with Primary Sources* reproduce tropes about communism and omit U.S. intervention. The former lauds dictator Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979) as a champion of democracy and calls the coup a “revolution” ([Goodwin, 2013: 93](#)). The latter draws parallels between Castro’s Cuban Revolution and the region’s right-wing dictatorships ([Dawson, 2014: 202](#)). Neither text mentions the United States’ role in Brazil’s dictatorship. It is thus not surprising that recent U.S. collaboration with anticorruption investigators has been ignored in most U.S. reference sources. Two unsigned articles, for instance, mislead readers into believing that Dilma Rousseff was impeached for corruption.¹ An entry in ABC-CLIO’s *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World* incorrectly connects Rousseff’s impeachment to the Petrobras corruption scandal that Lava Jato uncovered (*World Geography, n.d.*).²

Although we are not claiming that the United States was directly involved in Rousseff’s impeachment, these examples illustrate how segments of the U.S. intelligentsia were complicit with Lava Jato’s crusade to weaken the PT. Significantly, they primarily cite mainstream Anglophone media outlets, showing the shape of the echo chamber inhabited by U.S. corporate media and the authors of popularly oriented academic accounts. In effect, [Kevin Young \(2013\)](#) notes that “even the nation’s leading liberal media almost never acknowledge U.S. support for [repressive] regimes.” His analysis of five years of reporting by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and NPR on three dictatorships reveals that the U.S. role is mentioned only 6 percent of the time. When discussing the abuses committed by U.S. allies, U.S. support is rarely mentioned or is glossed over as “a force for democracy and human rights” ([Young, 2013](#)). Yet despite denials or justifications for U.S. meddling from government and media sources, evidence invariably surfaces in official documents, legal proceedings, lapses in the standard media narratives, and leaks.

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