

# “Ugly Canadians” Active in Brazil. The 1964 Military Coup and the Overthrow of Brazilian Democracy

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*Featured image: President João Goulart*

*New revelations about Brazilian military violence offer an opportunity to reflect on Canadian support for that country's 1964 coup and how Ottawa's policy towards our South American neighbour is similar today.*

A spate of international and Brazilian media have reported on a [recently uncovered](#) memo from CIA director **William Colby** to then US secretary of state, **Henry Kissinger**, detailing a meeting between president **Ernesto Geisel** and three Brazilian generals. At the 1974 meeting the new Brazilian president is reported to have supported extending “summary executions” of enemies of the military dictatorship. An army officer, Geisel ordered National Information Service head **João Baptista Figueiredo** — who would replace him as president — to authorize the executions.

While it has long been accepted that the military dictatorship was responsible for hundreds of murders — a 2014 [national truth](#) commission blamed it for [191 killings](#) and 210 disappearances — military backers have sought to put the blame on lower level officers. But the uncovered memo clearly reveals Geisel, who was considered more moderate than other top military leaders, was directly responsible for some deaths.

Ottawa passively supported the military coup against elected **President João Goulart** that instituted the 1964-85 military dictatorship.

*“[The Canadian](#) reaction to the military coup of 1964 was careful, polite and allied with American rhetoric,” notes Brazil and Canada in the Americas.*

**Prime Minister Lester Pearson** failed to publicly condemn the ouster of Goulart.

Washington played a pivotal role in the overthrow of Brazilian democracy. At one point **President Lyndon Johnson** urged ambassador **Lincoln Gordon** to take “every step that we can” to support Goulart’s removal. In a declassified cable between Gordon and Washington, the ambassador acknowledged US involvement in “[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.”

Washington, Ottawa and leading segments of Brazil’s business community opposed Goulart’s Reformas de Base (basic reforms). Goulart wanted to expand suffrage by giving

illiterates and low ranking military officers the vote. He also wanted to put 15% of the national income into education and to implement land reform. To pay for this the government planned to introduce a proportional income tax and greater controls on the profit transfers of multinational corporations.

As important as following Washington's lead, Pearson's tacit support for the coup was driven by Canadian corporate interests. Among the biggest firms in Latin America at the time, Brascan was commonly known as the "the Canadian octopus" since its tentacles reached into so many areas of Brazil's economy. A study of the Toronto-based company that began operating in Brazil in [1899](#) noted,

"[Brazilian Traction's vice-president Antonio] [Gallotti](#) doesn't hide his participation in the moves and operations that led to the coup d'état against Goulart in 1964."

After the elected government was overthrown, Brazilian Traction president **Grant Glassco** stated,

"[the new](#) government of Brazil is ... made up of men of proven competence and integrity. The President, **Humberto Castello Branco**, commands the respect of the entire nation."

Overthrowing the Goulart government, which had made it more difficult for companies to export profits, was good business. After the 1964 coup the *Financial Post* noted

"[the price](#) of Brazilian Traction common shares almost doubled overnight with the change of government from an April 1 low of \$1.95 to an April 3 high of \$3.60."

Between 1965 and 1974, Brascan drained Brazil of [\\$342 million](#) (\$2 billion today). When Brascan's Canadian president, **Robert Winters**, was asked why the company's profits grew so rapidly in the late 1960s his response was simple: "The Revolution."

As opposition to the Brazilian military regime's rights violations grew in Canada, Ottawa downplayed the gravity of the human rights situation. In a June 1972 memo to the Canadian embassy, the Director of the Latin American Division at Foreign Affairs stated:

"We have, however, done our best to avoid drawing attention to this problem [human rights violations] because we are anxious to build a vigorous and healthy relationship with Brazil. We hope that in the future these unfortunate events and publicity, which damages the Brazilian image in Canada, can be avoided."

The military dictatorship's assassination program has contemporary relevance. In 2016 Workers Party **President Dilma Rousseff** was impeached in a "[soft coup](#)" and the social democratic party's candidate for the upcoming presidential election, **Lula da Silva**, was recently jailed. The night before the Supreme Court was set to determine Lula's fate the general in charge of the army [hinted at military](#) intervention if the judges ruled in favour of

the former president and election frontrunner.

While they've made dozens of statements criticizing Venezuela over the past two years, the Justin Trudeau government seems to have remained silent on Rousseff's ouster, Lula's imprisonment and persecution of the left. The only comment I found was a Global Affairs official [telling Sputnik](#) that Canada would maintain relations with Brazil after Rousseff was impeached. Since that time Canada has begun [negotiating](#) to join the Brazilian led MERCOSUR trade block (just after Venezuela was [expelled](#)).

As many Brazilians worry about their country returning to military rule, Canadians should demand their government doesn't contribute to weakening the country's fragile democracy.

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