

Why Is Brazil Such a Basket Case?—The Role of U.S. Covert Action

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Ten U.S. presidents,^[1] 20 CIA directors,^[2] and 56 years of covert action^[3] screwed over Brazil's poor and paved the way for the election of Jair Bolsonaro

Covid-19, murder, evangelical Christianity, crime, environmental destruction, drugs, shantytowns, inequality, corruption, doesn't matter what you pick, Brazil is a world leader in them all—and more.

With the Worker's Party now waning, a tiny minority dominates the country's economy. About 1% of the population, i.e., 1.5 million people control 47% of all real estate.^[4] Brazil's poverty rate stands at [around 20 percent](#)—which Brazil's President, Jair Bolsonaro, has no problem with.

The perils of large-scale privatization initiatives under Bolsonaro were evident when the Amazon [city of Manaus ran out of oxygen to help COVID-19 patients](#).

Even when a private contractor informed the government that it could not adequately supply the city, [the government did nothing, stating—against all scientific evidence—that early treatment for COVID-19 did not work](#).

Gun ownership meanwhile has risen considerably since Bolsonaro took office in 2019, exploding in 2020.^[5]

It's the law of the jungle, a jungle which Bolsonaro is busy burning down. It's tropical neoliberalism. Nothing is sacred, least of all the lives of common people.

Bolsonaro has put the economy in the hands of a team of “Chicago boys,” disciples of so-called “free-market” theorist Milton Friedman.^[6]

The leader of this team, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes—a former investment banker—was a graduate of the University of Chicago where he studied under Friedman. He has appointed other Chicago grads to top posts, including Joaquim Levy to run a major state bank, Rubem Novaes another, and Roberto Castello Branco to manage oil giant Petrorbras.^[7]

Guedes himself lived in Augusto Pinochet's Chile and liked what he saw. His plan for Brazil is to cut taxes, cut pensions and cut government. In other words, he wants the wealthy at the top to own even more of Brazil.

It wasn't meant to be like this

Brazil began to modernize itself in 1930. The centralization of the Brazilian state followed a "lieutenants rebellion."

Building and strengthening the nation became the rule. This included the mobilization of the masses. It meant industrialization and development. All under the guiding eye of the Brazilian government.

The leader of this brave new Brazil was Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954). This predominantly benevolent dictator unleashed the power of the state.

Breaking with the semi-feudalism of Brazil's First Republic (1889-1930), Vargas politicized Brazil's working class. And therefore subverted the traditional power of a tiny minority who owned everything.

And by developing Brazil's natural resources for the good of Brazil (Vargas created Petrobras—the government owned oil company—in 1953), he subverted the "foreign markets and foreign investors," which had dominated Brazil since the 16th century.

How do we know that he subverted the local aristocracy and the global imperialists? Because Vargas said as much in his 1954 suicide note:

Once more the forces and interests which work against the people have organized themselves anew and break out against me...The underground campaign of international groups joined that of national groups which were working against the policy of full employment. The excess profits law was held up in Congress. Hatreds were unleashed against the just revision of minimum wages. I wished to bring national freedom in the use of our resources by means of Petrobras; this had hardly begun to operate when the wave of agitation swelled...^[8]

How can we trust his words? Because the dynamic or dialectic he describes explains perfectly the decades which followed his suicide. Time proved him right.

The presidents who succeeded Vargas, Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-61) and João Goulart (1961-64), continued the project which Vargas started: the construction of a popular state-led Brazilian economy. However, an underground campaign of international groups and national groups brought this project to a dramatic end in the infamous 1964 coup.

The national dimension of this coup that ended the vision of Vargas—known as "the father of the poor"—involved the overt actions of the Brazilian military. And the international dimension involved the covert activities of the U.S. government, which was the main instigator of the coup.

Washington, D.C. had a code name for the removal of João Goulart—"Operation Brother Sam"—and was prepared to invade if the coup did not go according to

plan.

U.S. warships (for example, the aircraft carrier *USS Forrestal*) were sent to Brazil to assist if necessary. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was the architect of the operation.

It funded and linked the domestic opposition to Goulart's popular nationalism. One million dollars was provided to the AFL-CIO's USAID funded American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which instructed trade union leaders on how to organize strikes and demonstrations against Goulart.^[9]

Afterwards, the CIA, under the cover of USAID's Office of Public Safety (OPS), ramped up training of the Brazilian police, who set up Operation Bandeirantes, a forerunner of the Phoenix program whose focus was to round up and torture leftist dissidents.^[10]

Cuban 'Agent' Says U.S. Police Aides Urged Torture

By ALAN RIDING
Special to The New York Times

HAVANA, Aug. 4 — A Cuban, who said that he had infiltrated the Central Intelligence Agency as a "double agent" and was sent to work in Uruguay, charged today that United States police advisers routinely recommended the use of torture for interrogation purposes there in the early 1970's.

Manuel Hevia Cosculluela, 44 years old, who said that he worked for the C.I.A. between 1962 and 1970, charged that an American official, Dan A. Mitrione, personally tortured four beggars to death with electric shocks as part of his interrogation course for Uruguayan policemen in 1970.

Mr. Mitrione, head of the United States Agency for International Development's public safety program in Montevideo, was killed by Uruguay's Tupamaro guerrillas following his kidnapping in 1970. At the time, the State Department denied charges by leftists that Mr. Mitrione had participated in torture.

"If you ask me whether any American

Mitrione, was not part of 'our program' — he never referred directly to the C.I.A. — but had worked very closely with 'our program' in Brazil."

Mr. Hevia, who attended high school at Watertown, Conn., in the early 1950's and speaks perfect English, said that Mr. Mitrione's interrogation courses involved the use of electric shocks, special chemicals and modern psychological techniques against detainees.

Academic Approach to Torture

"The special horror of the course was its academic, almost clinical atmosphere," he said. "Mitrione was a perfectionist. He was coldly efficient, he insisted on economy of effort. His motto was: 'The right pain in the right place at the right time.' A premature death, he would say, meant that the technique had failed."

Mr. Hevia said that early in 1970 he was told by Havana to prepare to return. "The last time I talked to Mitrione was in his home one evening over drinks," he recalled. "He said that he considered interrogation to be a complex art. First you have to soften up the detainee with blows

less. No questions, just blows and insults. Then just silent blows."

C.I.A. Refuses Comment

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 4 — A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency, asked for a response to the charges made in Havana, said that the C.I.A. did not customarily comment on allegations about operational activities.

Many Previous Reports

After Mr. Mitrione's killing in 1970, there were many unconfirmed reports, circulated principally by leftists in Uruguay, that he had participated in the torture of political prisoners.

A recently published book, "Hidden Terrors," by A.J. Langguth, quotes Uruguayan police sources as having said that Mr. Mitrione helped supply torture equipment, offered the police suggestions on techniques and was present when suspects were tortured. It cites no direct evidence that Mr. Mitrione had taken part in torture, and said that prisoners' stories about his participation "usually were

New York Times (August 5, 1978) [Source: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com). See also pando.com]

Foreign automakers collaborated with the new military junta by [helping to identify "subversives" on their payrolls](#) who were arrested or detained as part of Bandeirantes.

Lincoln Gordon, the U.S. ambassador to Brazil from 1961-1966, claimed that the 1964 coup was "the single most decisive victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century."^[11]

Freedom for U.S. elite interests, that is—and that of U.S. corporations and a minority of Brazilians who monopolized most of the wealth.

In the middle of the Cold War, Washington did not want another Cuba or another China. It viewed the popular agenda of Vargas and his successors as a threat to its global elitism as well as continued access to Brazil's oil, minerals, and other natural resources. By acting the way it did in Brazil, the U.S., in effect, was directly conserving the semi-feudal social relations which Vargas sought to modernize.

It was the signal foreign investors and foreign creditors were waiting for. Foreign money flowed into Brazil after 1964—while Brazil’s workers and peasants were once again trapped in their own country and forced to accept the lowest wages and worst working conditions. In the eyes of the U.S.-backed elite minority inside (and outside of) Brazil: It was an “economic miracle.”

Never mind the fact that, according to the National Truth Commission, which released a report in 2014, [8,000 indigenous people and at least 434 political dissidents were killed during the period of military rule.](#)

Today, when Jair Bolsonaro celebrates the coup of 1964, he is celebrating a U.S. plutocratic version of Brazil. He is rejecting Brazilian sovereignty and reviving a National Security Doctrine which the U.S. exported to Brazil during the Cold War—a doctrine that highlights an “internal enemy” (working class politics or environmental politics or landless politics or Indio politics).

In short, he is celebrating a doctrine that criminalizes modern social relations and institutionalizes semi-feudal social relations.

After World War Two, this doctrine was transmitted from the U.S. to Brazil via military colleges and the U.S. School of the Americas, now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. And its purpose was anything but Brazil’s “national security.” On the contrary, it was designed to secure the economic and geopolitical interests of the U.S. and its constituency in Brazil—the tiny minority which owned everything.^[12]

Washington, D.C.’s top Cold War planner, George F. Kennan, succinctly summed up the idea behind the doctrine (and therefore outlined the future of Brazil) in 1950—when writing about Latin America:

The final answer might be an unpleasant one, [a military dictatorship, extreme inequality, but] we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government. This is not shameful, since the communists [popular and nationalistic politicians] are essentially traitors [...] It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by communists [socially progressive nationalists].^[13]

Considering the 1964 coup a [“triumphant strike against communism,”](#) Bolsonaro directly served the military government in Brazil in the late 1970s as an army captain.

His superior officers stated that he [“had aggressive ambition”](#) including for [“financial and economic gain,”](#) a reference to Bolsonaro’s attempt to mine gold in [Bahia](#) state.

The Obama administration helped facilitate Bolsonaro’s rise by [failing to condemn the illegal impeachment in August 2016 of Dilma Rousseff of the Brazilian Workers Party,](#) who in her youth had been tortured by the Brazilian army.^[14]

Rousseff was accused of illegally manipulating government accounts, but the charges were heavily politicized.

Her successor, Michel Temer, was later arrested on more substantiated charges that

included accepting a \$1 million bribe in exchange for awarding three companies a construction contract for a nuclear power plant.^[15]

The day after Rousseff's impeachment, the leader of Brazil's Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Aloysio Nunes, came to the U.S. and met with Thomas Shannon, the Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, which signaled backing for the de facto coup that brought an end to what the World Bank called Brazil's "golden decade" under Workers Party rule, during which millions were lifted out of poverty.^[16]



Aloysio Nunes and Brazilian Ambassador Sergei Amaral present the Grand Cross of the Rio Branco order to U.S. Ambassador Thomas Shannon in 2018. [Source: twitter.com]

Bolsonaro has continued Brazil's great reversal, never hiding his allegiance to the U.S.

Nor is he hiding his contempt for the Brazil which Vargas and his successors tried to build. In March 2019, after becoming Brazilian President in January—in an act of homage and an act of obedience—he visited the U.S. headquarters of the CIA—the architects of the 1964 coup.

In August 2019, Bolsonaro declared that it is his intention, by 2022, to completely privatize Vargas's greatest legacy—Petrobras—the state-owned oil company.

There is one more U.S. doctrine which encapsulates post-1964 Brazil and particularly the Brazil of Bolsonaro: the Low-Intensity Conflict doctrine. This is "characterized by the military taking on police roles and the police acting more like the military."^[17]

When a minority owns a disproportionate share of the wealth, the tendency is to criminalize the majority poor. The class war begins to feel like a low-intensity war.

Since the U.S.-made coup of 1964, Brazil has been caught up in a low-intensity conflict in which—to paraphrase President Bolsonaro—people die like cockroaches. Since the

beginning of the 21st century—more than 1,000,000 people have been murdered in Brazil.^[18] It is safe to say that almost all were poor people—“the children of Vargas.”

*

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Notes

[1] Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush1 Clinton, Bush2, Obama, Trump.

[2] Dulles, McCone, Raborn, Helms, Schlesinger, Colby, Bush, Turner, Casey, Webster, Gates, Woolsey, Deutch, Tenet, Goss, Hayden, Panetta, Petraeus, Brennan, Pompeo.

[3] 1964-2018.

[4] Lulu Garcia-Navarro, “For Brazil’s 1 Percenters The Land Stays In The Family Forever,” August 25, 2015, <https://landportal.org/news/2015/08/brazils-1-percenters-land-stays-family-forever>

[5] Alicia Prager and Laís Martins, “Firearms exports to Brazil surge as gun ownership increases under Bolsonaro,” July 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com>

[6] David Biller and Raymond Colitt, “[Milton Friedman’s Brazil Moment: Band of Disciplines Take Charge.](#)” *Bloomberg News*, December 12, 2018.

[7] Biller and Colitt, “Milton Friedman’s Brazil Moment.”

[8] Getúlio Vargas “suicide note,” August 24, 1954, quoted in Thayer Watkins, “Getulio Vargas and the Estado Novo,” San José State University Department of Economics, <https://www.sjsu.edu>

[9] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 69.

[10] Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation Building in the American Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 225; Martha K. Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

[11] David Binder, “U.S. Assembled a Force in 1964 For Possible Use in Brazil Coup,” December 30, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com>; The Dominion news from the grassroots, “US Role in 1964 Brazilian Military Coup Revealed: National Security Archive,” April 6, 2004, <https://www.dominionpaper.ca>; James G. Hershberg and Peter Kornbluh, “Brazil Marks 50th Anniversary of Military Coup,” April 2, 2014, The National Security Archive, <https://www.nsarchive2.gwu.edu>; Wright, Thomas C., *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001).

[12] Eduardo Munhoz Svartman, “Brazil-United States Military Relations during the Cold War: Political Dynamic and Arms Transfers,” January 2011, *brazilianpoliticsscience* review, <https://www.oaji.net>

[13] George F. Kennan, 1950, quoted in Anthony W. Pereira, “The US Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A

Reassessment," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12518>

[14] Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Obama's Unending Wars: Fronting the Foreign Policy of the Permanent Warfare State* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2019), 303.

[15] Anna Jean Kaier, "Brazil's Former President Michel Temer Arrested in Corruption Investigation," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/21/brazils-former-president-michel-temer-arrested-in-corruption-investigation>

[16] Kuzmarov, *Obama's Unending Wars*, 303, 304.

[17] Joseph Nevins and Timothy Dunn, "Conflict of a Different Sort," October 31, 2008, NACLA Report, <https://www.nacla.org>

[18] Robert Muggah, "Brazil's Murder Rate Finally Fell - and by a Lot," April 22, 2019, <https://www.foreignpolicy.com>

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