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# The US Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil: A Reassessment

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The role of the US in the 1964 coup in Brazil is controversial. When did US policymakers decide to support the coup conspirators, and why? This article reviews some recent works on the 1964 coup and makes two arguments. First, recently declassified documents show that the US joined the coup conspiracy only in 1963 not, as some claim, in 1961 or 1962. Second, many scholars do not explain the actions of US policymakers, or see their decisions as the inevitable consequence of US imperialism. This article argues that shifts in US domestic politics during the Cold War, as well as the pattern of post-war foreign policy in Latin America, help explain US support for the coup.

Keywords: Brazilian politics, Cold War, democracy, dictatorship, military intervention, US foreign policy.

The support of the US government for the coup d'état in Brazil in 1964 remains a controversial topic. Documents recently declassified by the United States have enabled scholars to re-evaluate the US role in this pivotal event in the history of Brazil. A particularly contested issue is when the US decided to support the overthrow of the elected President João Goulart, and why.

This article reviews some recent works that address this topic. It makes two points. First, some of these works, even those drawing extensively on US government documents released in the last fifteen years, claim that the US decided to overthrow Goulart as early as 1961 or 1962. This article argues against such an interpretation, and makes a distinction between US destabilisation of the Goulart government and support for the coup. Second, much of the recently published literature devotes insufficient attention to the issue of why the US supported the coup. To understand this question, it is necessary to appreciate the complicated internal politics of the United States, as well as the prior history of US foreign policy towards Latin America.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it reviews some recent works on the 1964 coup and highlights their differing analyses of the timing of US support for the coup, as well as the reasons for this support. The second and third sections of the article will examine the domestic politics of the United States prior to 1964, and how changes of the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s produced an environment in which official US support for a military coup in Brazil became more probable. The third section will examine the tension in US policy towards Latin America between, on one hand, liberalism towards and tolerance of nationalist and leftist movements and, on the other, a hardline posture in favour of militarism and authoritarianism. The fourth part of the article will analyse

several important steps towards support for the coup taken by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. This section will draw on US government documents, some of them recently declassified by the National Security Archives and the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries. In this section, I will argue against interpretations found in some recent books on the coup published in Brazil. The conclusion summarises the argument, and discusses the significance of US support for the coup in the twenty-first century.

## Some Recent Work on the US and the 1964 Coup

The role of the US in the coup is well known. There are important books about this, for example by Parker (2011), Dreifuss (2006) and Fico (2008). One work that has received somewhat less attention is Bandeira [1978] (2001). Bandeira sees the US role in the coup as stemming from the interest of the US capitalist class in inhibiting autonomous, nationalist industrialisation in Brazil (Bandeira, [1978] 2001: 13). In this reading, the clash between the US and the Goulart government was inevitable and driven by the increasing lack of complementarity between the two national economies, once Brazil began to industrialise in the mid-twentieth century. There is little independence for political leaders in such an analysis, nor is there much recognition of variation in US foreign policy towards the various Latin American countries, or for change in US policy over time. For Bandeira, the Kennedy administration joined the opposition to, and showed a predisposition to depose, Goulart well before 1963.

Two books published on the 50th anniversary of the coup, by Netto (2014) and Tavares (2014) make similar arguments to Bandeira's. For Netto, as for Bandeira, the economic interests of imperialistic US corporations made the US government's opposition to Goulart inevitable. Netto argues that the US turned definitively against Goulart in early 1962, because of the Brazilian position in the Organisation of American States' Punta del Este meeting in January of that year, refusing to completely endorse the US position on Cuba (Netto, 2014: 38). For Netto, as for Bandeira, the US was engaged in 'a process of preventive counter-revolution on a world scale' that made a clash with Goulart inevitable (Netto, 2014: 74). Tavares, drawing heavily on recently declassified documents, comes to a similar conclusion. He traces the events of 1964 to a meeting in the White House on 30 July 1962, which 'definitively opened the road to the coup in Brazil' (Tavares, 2014: 111). Tavares sees US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon as the key figure in devising and implementing US policy, and believes that all aspects of that policy, even the deployment of the Peace Corps, were directed towards the removal of Goulart.

Fico presents a more sophisticated analysis than that of Netto and Tavares. Fico distinguishes carefully between US destabilisation of the Goulart government and the conspiracy to topple him. The US considered many options and engaged in different types of actions in 1961 and 1962, but only began to move to overthrow Goulart in 1963 (Fico, 2014: 31). As this article will show in section four, Fico gets the chronology right. However, he does not explain why the shift occurred, instead referring vaguely to the fact that 'in a certain moment' the Kennedy administration decided to support the removal of Goulart (Fico, 2014: 29). As will be argued in section four of this article, a key moment in this sequence of events was the visit of Robert Kennedy to Goulart in December 1962. After this visit, US policymakers seem to give up on the idea of pulling Goulart towards the political centre and inducing him to be more accommodating to US demands.

Recent scholarship is therefore still divided about the timing of US support for the 1964 coup, as well as the reasons for this support. I argue that seeing the US as an inveterate supporter of military coups in Latin America throughout the Cold War, driven by pressures from US capitalists to stifle autonomous national development in the region, is to miss much of the nuance in the series of events that led to US support for the 1964 coup in Brazil. A thorough understanding of 1964 should include some consideration of US domestic politics after World War II, and the history of US foreign policy towards Latin America during the same period. It is to those two issues that we now turn.

## Politics in the USA after World War II

The US Federal government at the time of the 1964 military coup in Brazil was controlled by the Democratic Party and led by the Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had succeeded John F. Kennedy after the latter's assassination in 1963. Kennedy narrowly won the 1960 presidential election after two terms of a Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower. The Democrats continually held a majority of seats in both the Senate and House after the 1954 Congressional elections, a dominance that endured until 1994. Although the Democrats are often perceived, especially in the US itself, as being more moderate in foreign policy than the Republicans, it is important to recall just how hawkish they were in this period, as the United States moved to the right in the 1950s.

During the Red Scare of 1950–1956, Senator Joseph McCarthy led a witch-hunt in Congress for Communists in the public sector, trade unions, universities, and Hollywood. The young lawyer Robert Kennedy worked as an advisor to Senator McCarthy in 1952–1953, gaining a reputation for stubbornness and toughness. Southern Democrats controlled many Congressional committees. These Democratic Senators and Congressional representatives were often more politically conservative than Republicans from the Northeast and West. They were staunch defenders of racial segregation in the South and militarism in foreign policy (Katznelson, 2014).

Because they came from states that were completely dominated by the Democratic Party, and were thus de facto one-party states, these Southern representatives stayed in Congress a long time. They were able to use the seniority system to gain control of some of the most important House and Senate committees. Southern Congressional representatives depended greatly on patronage doled out to their regions by the Defense Department, in the form of military bases and contracts for weapons and services. Defence spending remained high in the US after the end of WWII and did not fall, as it had after WWI. The importance of the South for the Democratic Party is the reason that Kennedy chose Johnson as his running mate for the 1960 presidential campaign. Katznelson (2014) calls the South during this period the 'Southern cage' of US politics.

Like electoral politics, trade unionism in the USA moved rightwards in the 1950s. In 1955 the two large labor confederations the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) merged. According to some analysts, the CIO had been more committed to industrial democracy than the AFL, which the CIO criticised for its racism, nativism, and elitism (Aronowitz, 1973: 173). However, the new entity, which represented 15 million workers, was led by the former President of the AFL, George Meany, a fierce anti-Communist (and someone who would later be involved, indirectly, in the support for the coup in Brazil).

In the 1960 Presidential election, Kennedy attacked his rival, Vice-President Richard Nixon, in an attempt to convince the electorate that he was a stronger Cold War warrior than was Nixon. He alleged that there was a 'missile gap' with the Soviets and that Nixon was insufficiently tough in defence of US interests in the Cold War. The missile gap was later shown to be illusory, but the tactic helped Kennedy to win the election.

Overall, changes in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s made it less likely that there could be peaceful relations between governments of the left or centre-left in Latin America and the US government. The intensification of the Cold War, US paranoia about Communism, and the dribbling away of the New Deal progressivism of the 1930s and 1940s in US domestic politics made such a rapprochement difficult. Instead, a national security state, high defence spending, militarisation and social conformism were characteristics of the United States in this period.

## US Policy towards Latin America after World War II

Two interconnected academic debates divided the United States in the post-WWII period. Realists argued with liberals about how to understand international relations, while hardliners and moderates debated how to conduct US foreign policy. There are many affinities between positions in these debates, but the issues in each are distinct. Realists are not always hardliners. Sometimes realists argue against the use of force, as they did before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In US history, liberals have often been advocates and practitioners of armed intervention, as when President Wilson sent US troops to occupy Vera Cruz, Mexico in 1914.

Hans Morgenthau, the father of classical realism and the author of the influential *Politics Among Nations* (1950), first published in 1948, argued that the United States was more powerful, but also more vulnerable, after WW II. He thought that the American tradition in foreign policy, at least until the Spanish-American War, had been anti-imperialist and legalistic. He argued that the US had to abandon this tradition and adopt a new perspective appropriate to its new power. In a striking passage he writes:

From the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the Second World War it mattered little what policies the United States pursued with regard to its Latin American neighbors, China, or Spain. The self-sufficiency of its own strength, in conjunction with the operation of the balance of power, made the United States immune to the boundless ambition born of success and the fear and frustration which goes with failure. The United States could take success and failure in stride without being unduly tempted or afraid. Now it stands outside the enclosures of its continental citadel, taking on the whole of the political world as friend or foe. It has become dangerous and vulnerable, feared and afraid. The risk of being very powerful, but not omnipotent, is aggravated by a second fact: a dual revolution in the political situation of the world. The multiple state system of the past, which in the moral sense was one world, has been transformed into two inflexible, hostile blocs, which are morally two worlds. (Morgenthau, [1948] 1950: 8)

In this new Cold War environment, according to Morgenthau, US relations with Latin America were strategically important. Economic policies to the region, in particular, were 'the instrumentalities of a political policy', or 'the means to the end of controlling

the policies of another nation' (Morgenthau, [1948] 1950: 15) and, therefore, not to be judged in purely economic terms. According to Morgenthau, the US had to be prepared to defend its national interest pragmatically and unequivocally in Latin America.

The concept of totalitarianism was important to the realism of this period. Realists argued that totalitarian regimes were ruthless and relentlessly expansionist. The totalitarian menace was supposedly so great that it required the managers of the US state to abandon conventional morality in order to combat it. An important creator of the idea of totalitarianism was Hannah Arendt. Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) in 1951. In the book, she uses documents captured from the Nazis to extrapolate to the USSR and create an ideal-type totalitarian regime. Unlike the portrait of the Nazi regime, which was based on a rich documentary foundation, the analysis of Stalinism was largely conjectural. According to Arendt, both regimes were monolithic in structure and globally hegemonic in aspiration.

However, with the benefit of hindsight, the totalitarian model did not fit the Soviet Union well. There was more pluralism in the Soviet Union than the model acknowledged, especially after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. There was also more modesty with regard to the export of the Soviet model abroad, particularly in Latin America and especially after the agreement between the United States and the USSR in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the totalitarian model, developed by political scientists such as Carl Friedrich (1954) was used to justify hardline positions against Communism and hints of Communism. According to this view, once a country went Communist, it was impossible to ever restore capitalism and liberal democracy to it. In the words of Elliott Abrams, the architect of policies against the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s, 'if communism was a disease whose existence could not be prevented, it was one whose spread was controllable' (Smith, [1962] 1990: xxi). Therefore a global system of quarantine, or containment, was necessary.

After the passage of the 1947 National Security Act and the X article by realist diplomat George Kennan in the same year, containment became a linchpin of US foreign policy (Ranelagh, 1986: 110, 129–131). In this perspective, Latin America was of vital strategic importance because it contained raw materials that were of economic and military value to the US, and Latin American votes in the United Nations gave the US political support. In addition, Latin America would be the last area the US could rely on if Europe became anti-American (Ranelagh, 1986: 275). According to Kennan, it was important to prevent Latin America from being militarily exploited by the USSR or mobilised against the US. Writing in 1950, Kennan declared that security had to come first in US policy towards Latin America. 'The final answer might be an unpleasant one', he wrote, but 'we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government. This is not shameful, since the communists 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' (Kennan quoted in Ranelagh, 1986: 275).

The two key mechanisms of containment were economic aid to allied regimes and political parties, on one hand, and support for regime overthrow in the case of recalcitrant or overly 'relaxed' and 'indulgent' governments. In Latin America, an example of the use of the first mechanism is US policy to Bolivia after the revolution there in 1952. The US reacted in a moderate fashion to the revolution, offering economic assistance to the new government, and attempting to move Bolivia in a conservative direction. The policy was considered a great success inside the US government. In the words of Zunes (2001: 48), 'The National Security Council saw the successful handling of the Bolivian

situation as a model, and it was one that would be exploited to the fullest in Latin America and elsewhere’.

An example of the other, hardline mechanism was the operation against the Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954, after modest reforms, including the expropriation of land owned by the United Fruit Company. The CIA organised a paramilitary force to overthrow Arbenz and put Carlos Castillo Armas in his place (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 1990). This was also considered a great success within US government circles, another way to protect US interests in Latin America.

In Cuba, the US government tried to utilise both mechanisms. When the revolutionaries of the 26th of July movement toppled the Batista government in January 1959, the US Ambassador at the time, Earl Smith, tried to encourage the creation of a centre-right government, a politics of ‘Batistismo without Batista’. This attempt was not successful. At that point, the US sent a new Ambassador to Cuba, in February 1959. Philip Bonsal had served in Bolivia and been one of the agents of the US policy of moderating the revolution there. In his 1971 memoir, Bonsal wrote:

When I arrived in Havana in February 1959, I shared a widespread belief that the Cuban establishment, including the politicians who had opposed Batista and those citizens (from capitalists through the emerging middle class to the members of the labor unions) who had enjoyed relative economic stability and security, now had a major role to play. This establishment would, I thought, confine the new government and the leaders from the Sierra Maestra, including Castro, within democratic patterns of behavior. But after November 1959 [...] I had given up hope of accommodation with Castro. (Bonsal, 1971: 4–6)

After this, the US government suspended Cuba’s quota of sugar exports to the US in 1960, and in 1961 engaged in the botched attempt to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. It is important to consider that the moderate line represented by Ambassador Bonsal, the policy that had seemed to work so well in Bolivia, was seen as a failure in Cuba. Cuba was said by US policymakers to have been lost, and this loss was in the minds of Johnson administration officials when the Brazilian coup of 1964 took place. The Cuban experience reinforced North American proclivities to seek a hardline solution to political conflicts in Brazil.

As will be described in the next section, the same mechanisms seen in US policy towards Bolivia and Cuba – economic aid and destabilisation – can be seen in US policy towards Brazil. After a period of trying to induce a move to the centre by the Goulart administration by using the prospect of economic aid, the US government switched to a more hostile position of seeking to destabilise – and eventually replace – the Goulart government.

## The Road to the Coup: the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations

There were a number of important moments in the journey of the US government towards support for the 1964 coup in Brazil. The first came at the end of July 1962, when President Kennedy spoke with his advisors and considered military options in Brazil. The second came in December 1962, when President Kennedy sent his brother Bobby to speak with President Goulart, and try to persuade him to change the composition and direction of his government. In October 1963, Kennedy and his top advisers



## *The US and the 1964 Coup*

considered their options in a White House meeting, in which they explored support for a coup. Finally, at the end of March 1964, after the coup makers had already made their first move, President Johnson was briefed by his advisors and told them to do everything they could to ensure the coup's success.

The declassified documents from these and other meetings suggest that US policymakers knew less about Brazil than many contemporary observers thought was the case. Furthermore, although they had a well-defined sense of national interests, US policymakers were open to several possible outcomes in Brazil, and as late as the end of 1963, doubted the capacity of the Brazilian military to carry out a successful coup against Goulart. Furthermore, although the names of potential successors to Goulart were discussed in these meetings, none of the leading figures of the post-coup government in Brazil seem to have been well known to Kennedy, Johnson, or their advisors. The picture the documents paint is not of a meticulously planned and well-executed clandestine operation. It is rather of a haphazard series of reactions to (often) unanticipated events, in which US interests eventually prevailed, but largely because they coincided with those of significant domestic forces in Brazil.

It is well known that the US did not issue any condemnation of the military-civilian attempt to block the accession of Vice President João Goulart to the presidency after the resignation of Jânio Quadros in 1961. The US observed the resolution of the conflict, which was that Goulart assumed the presidency with limited powers, in a parliamentary system concocted for his mandate. It was the period of the Alliance for Progress, and the US was offering economic assistance to some countries in Latin America, within the limits of the capitalist system and liberal democracy of the period.

The Kennedy administration worried about President Goulart, because of the support for him from leftist trade unions and parties, and the climate of excitement on the left generated by the Cuban revolution. Publicly, Kennedy spoke of respecting Brazilian sovereignty, but privately, in the Oval Office, he discussed ways to destabilise Brazil. On 30 July 1962, Kennedy spoke with some of his advisors about the situation in Brazil. The meeting was secretly recorded. The US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon, called 'Linc' by Kennedy, was present. Gordon said: I think one of our important jobs is to strengthen the spine of the military. To make it clear, discreetly, that we are not necessarily hostile to any kind of military action whatsoever if it's clear that the reason for the military action is ...'

Kennedy interrupted: 'Against the Left'.

Gordon: 'he's giving the damn country away to the ...'

Kennedy: 'Communists'.

Later, Gordon said of the Brazilian military, 'they are very friendly to us: very anti-Communist, very suspicious of Goulart.' A little later in the conversation, the presidential advisor Richard Goodwin said, 'Because we may very well want them [the Brazilian military] to take over at the end of the year, if they can.' Further on in the discussion, President Kennedy asked: 'What kind of liaison do we have with the military?' Gordon: Well, it's pretty good. The military is not united. This is one of the things that make it complicated.' And later, 'Well, we need, we need a new Army attaché badly ... The Army is much ... that's the ... most important [of the three Brazilian armed services]. This is the key fellow in the relationship.'

Kennedy: 'Our fellow, is he good?'

Gordon: 'Our present fellow is ... he's nice but fairly stupid ...'



Kennedy: 'But of course, we don't have many fellows who can speak Portuguese, do we?'

Gordon: 'Well, there are a few around, not many, not many ...'

Later, Gordon said: 'Dick Walters?'

Goodwin: 'Dick Walters'. (Walters had served in Italy during World War II as the US Army's combat liaison officer to the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, the FEB, and was fluent in Portuguese. In July 1962, Walters was Army attaché in Italy.)

Kennedy: 'Does he know anything about Portugal? ...'

Gordon: 'Oh, he speaks Portuguese fluently. He's a hell of a good fellow; he's got a good political sense, too.'

After more discussion, Kennedy said: 'We gotta get somebody down there who can establish liaison quickly ... you got to speak Portuguese.'

(From White House, Transcript of Meeting Between President Kennedy, US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon and NSC Director Richard Goodwin, 30 July 1962, pp. 18–22.)

This was a significant meeting. It led to the sending to Rio of Vernon Walters, who had an important role in the 1964 coup, but one that is still not fully understood due to the persistence of classified documents that have not been made public (de Oliveira, 2009). However, this meeting was not, as Tavares (2014: 111) claims, a moment in which US policymakers definitively decided to support the ouster of Goulart. Nevertheless, the discussion did contradict official US policy at the time. The day after the fateful meeting, on 31 July 1962, Kennedy met the Brazilian Ambassador Roberto Campos and a group of visiting Brazilian military students at the White House. One of the students asked Kennedy what the reaction of the US government would be if Brazil were to socialise the means of production in order to engage in the struggle against underdevelopment more effectively. Kennedy's response was urbane, liberal, and tolerant. 'I think that the decision of your country about the means to achieve progress is your decision, and if by socialisation you mean control over the means of production and basic industries, this is a judgment that you have to make. What we are against is the negation of civil liberties ...' (From White House Audio Tape, President John F. Kennedy making remarks to the Brazilian Ambassador to the US and Visiting Brazilian Students, 31 July 1962.) Publicly, Kennedy acknowledged Brazil's right to economic sovereignty; behind closed doors, he contemplated US support for an anti-constitutional, armed intervention in order to protect US economic and strategic interests.

However, in 1962, US policymakers were focused primarily on pushing Goulart towards the centre-right of the political spectrum, rather than overthrowing him. This was partly because they thought Goulart was pliable, but also because they had no confidence in the capacity of the Brazilian military for effective action against Goulart. They also feared the political backlash an unsuccessful coup attempt would generate.

A second important step towards US support for the coup came in December 1962, when Kennedy sent his brother Bobby, then US Attorney General, to meet with President Goulart in Brasília. This meeting occurred after the Cuban Missile crisis of October 1962, when the US emerged strengthened from the confrontation with the Soviet Union. Earlier in the year the US government had moved to expel Cuba from the Organisation of American States at this point. Brazil had not fully supported the US in this action, which irritated the Kennedy administration. After a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council on 11 December 1962, Bobby Kennedy went to Brazil,

## *The US and the 1964 Coup*

where he met President Goulart in the Alvorada Palace on 18 December, together with US Ambassador Lincoln Gordon and an interpreter.

Bobby Kennedy spoke with Goulart for 3 hours in that meeting. Bobby Kennedy mentioned many problems from the US point of view: the presence of Communists, ultranationalists (read nationalists), extreme leftists (read leftists) and anti-Americans in Goulart's government. He also spoke of the expulsion of the Peace Corps from a Brazilian state and Goulart's alleged lack of support for the Alliance for Progress. Bobby Kennedy also expressed concern about the economy, with inflation at 5 percent per month and low international reserves. He brought up the expropriation of an ITT subsidiary in Rio Grande do Sul (by Governor Leonel Brizola) and the possibility of Brazil exchanging one hundred helicopters from Poland for coffee.

President Goulart's response was long and detailed, emphasising the delicate political position of his government and the country. At one point in Goulart's response, Bobby Kennedy wrote a note to Gordon that said, 'We seem to be getting no place'. Later, Bobby compared Goulart to Jimmy Hoffa, the powerful leader of the Teamsters Union in the US, with whom he had clashed in a Congressional hearing in 1957, and whom he accused of corruption. (From U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, Airgram A-710, 'Minutes of Conversation between Brazilian President Joao Goulart and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Brasilia, 17 December 1962, pp. 1–17. The passing of the note from RFK to Ambassador Gordon is described on p. 10.)

From the Kennedy administration's point of view, Bobby Kennedy's meeting with Goulart had not gone well. In January 1963, the opportunity the meeting represented was lost, because Goulart won the referendum that restored full powers to his presidency, and he became increasingly autonomous of the US. In this regard, the interpretation of Loureiro (2014) seems correct. Loureiro argues that in 1963, the Kennedy administration began to block economic assistance to Goulart and abandon the attempt to use economic incentives to induce his government to move to the centre-right. Over the course of 1963, the White House became more and more interested in overthrowing Goulart's government, and actively sought partners in this endeavour.

In a White House meeting on 8 March 1963, Bobby Kennedy was the advisor toughest on the Goulart government. He insisted, as he had when he met Goulart three months before, that Goulart had to make adjustments to the economy being demanded by the US, and remove anti-US and leftist politicians from his cabinet. He said, 'they're going to have to do something down there ... this is not something that Congress will tolerate, the American people will tolerate, or that you [President Kennedy] *can* tolerate'. Congress, Bobby went on, is 'going to have a hell of a time trying to sell any kind of help and assistance to a country that wants this kind of money from us and yet at the same time puts important communists or people who are very anti-United States in important positions of power ... they haven't vocally and enthusiastically aligned themselves with the Alliance for Progress and I mean, that's the whole operation in South America and Central America ... we're not fooling around about it, we're not going to continue, we're giving him some time to make these changes but we can't continue this forever ... he can't have it both ways, can't have the communists and put them in important positions and make speeches criticising the United States and at the same time get 225-[2]50 million dollars from the United States. He can't have it both ways. He's got to really make the choice, because you don't have any choice about it.' (From White House, Excerpts from John F. Kennedy's conversation regarding Brazil with US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon on Friday 8 March 1963, Meeting 77.1, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, pp. 7–9.)

Goulart had to make a choice, but he had no choice – this was Bobby Kennedy's logic. Goulart was being made an offer he could not refuse. His continued recalcitrance resulted in US policy switching track from persuasion to violence. As Fico (2014) argues against the interpretations of Netto (2014) and Tavares (2014), 1963 was the key year in which US policymakers resolved to support the removal of Goulart. There is no evidence in the declassified documents that the decision was taken earlier.

During the rest of 1963, the Kennedy administration searched for a plausible group within the armed forces capable and willing to overthrow Goulart. On 7 October 1963, a meeting to explore US options took place in the White House. Kennedy's advisors still lacked conviction at this point that a coup attempt could be successful. At one point Kennedy asked, 'Do you see a situation coming where we might be – find it desirable to intervene militarily ourselves?' Ambassador Gordon said that he was working on a plan involving people in Rio, Washington and Panama, where SOUTHCOM (Southern Command of the US Army), commanded by General Andrew O'Meara at the time, was based. (This plan has still not been declassified. Contrary to Fico (2014: 74), I see this plan as having been entirely separate from Operation Brother Sam, the naval task force sent in support of the coup in early April 1964.) Gordon said that a US invasion would require six divisions, many ships and a 'massive military operation'. He then declared that 'it all depends on what the Brazilian military do' but he feared that a coup attempt could lead to an 'internal clash' and 'the beginnings of what would amount to a civil war'. (From White House, Excerpts from John F. Kennedy's conversation regarding Brazil with US Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon on Monday, 7 October 1963, Tape 114/A50, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, pp. 7–8). President Johnson inherited these contingency plans when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in late November. It remained for him to execute them. On the evening of 31 March 1964, Johnson was at his ranch in Texas when George Ball, his Undersecretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs, called him. The context of this telephone call is important. In January, Panamanians protested against the US military base in the Canal Zone, and the Republicans had criticised Johnson for responding with insufficient firmness. The Republican primaries had begun, and the leading candidate in them, Barry Goldwater, alleged that Johnson was not a strong enough Cold warrior, quoting Cicero that 'extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice'. Johnson was not worried about getting the nomination to be the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, but he was not sure he would win the November general election.

In Johnson's phone conversation, which was secretly recorded, Undersecretary of State Ball briefed the President. He mispronounced Minas Gerais, sounded confused about the number of states in Brazil, and told the President that a naval task force ready to help the coup plotters (but with no commitment) could not arrive in Brazil before 10 April. He also said that the task force could be sent in a way that would 'not cause any sort of stir' – i.e. it would not be made public. (Former US Ambassador Lincoln Gordon (2003), claimed that the US government did not even tell the coup plotters about the naval task force. This defies logic and seems to be an attempt by Gordon to diminish his responsibility for the installation of the dictatorship.) Ball said that the situation in Brazil was confused, but that São Paulo was the key to the coup. He said that he was waiting for news of the actions of the Second Army (located in São Paulo), which he hoped to receive in several hours.

Ball reassured Johnson that the coup against Goulart had begun and talked of civilian support for the coup, especially from nine anti-Goulart governors from the big, important states. He said that he'd told Ambassador Gordon not to make any more contacts

## *The US and the 1964 Coup*

with Brazilians and that it would be prudent to wait another 12 hours or so before making a judgment about what to do. President Johnson's response was emphatic. 'I think that we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do, as we were in Panama, if that is at all feasible', said the President 'I'd put everybody there, anyone that has any imagination or ingenuity ... we just can't take this one and I'd get right on top of it and stick my neck out a little.' (From White House Audio Tape, President Lyndon Johnson discussing the impending coup in Brazil with Undersecretary of State George Ball, 31 March 1964.)

Johnson feared an unsuccessful coup attempt, a debacle that the Republicans could use against him in the election. In the end, he need not have worried. The White House recognised the new government in Brazil with indecent haste, on 2 April 1964. By historical coincidence, the Civil Rights Act, the result of years of mobilisation by African Americans and their allies, arrived in the US Senate on 26 March 1964, five days before the coup in Brazil. In a week when millions of African Americans were finally having their rights of citizenship recognised by the US government, Brazilians were losing theirs.

In Washington there were many celebrations after the coup in Brazil. One member of Congress called the Brazilian coup the best thing that had happened in Latin America for a long time. General O'Meara, head of SOUTHCOM, testified in Congress: 'The arrival in power of the government of Castelo Branco last April in Brazil saved the country from a dictatorship that would have been followed inevitably by Communist domination'. Congressional representative Harold Gross asked the General, 'Is it a dictatorship today?' and the General replied 'No' (quoted in Languth, 1978: 116).

When US Ambassador to Brazil, Lincoln Gordon returned to Washington after the coup, he encountered Bobby Kennedy. Kennedy was happy about what had happened in Brazil. According to the journalist A. J. Languth, Kennedy said: 'Well, Goulart got what was coming to him' ... 'Too bad he didn't follow the advice we gave him when I was down there' (Languth, 1978: 116).

In summary, the 1964 coup was not inevitable. The United States government prepared for numerous different outcomes in Brazil. Contrary to the interpretations of Bandeira [1978] (2001), Netto (2014) and Tavares (2014), there is no evidence that US policymakers fully committed to supporting the overthrow of Goulart in 1961 or 1962. But when the possibility of a coup arose in 1963, the domestic political situation in the US, together with previous experiences in the exercise of US foreign policy in Latin America – especially the 'loss' of Cuba – influenced Washington to weigh in heavily on the side of the coup plotters. In this way, a sad chapter in the history of US foreign policy ended. The episode is a reminder of how important US policy once was to Brazil and the rest of Latin America, in contrast to the present era, in which Washington's policies are, if not irrelevant to Brazil, then much less significant than they used to be (Brenner and Hershberg, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The debate about the US role in the coup will no doubt continue. This article has challenged interpretations that see the US support for the coup as stemming inevitably from US capitalists' desire to stifle autonomous economic development in Brazil. It argues that US actions were more contingent than that, and US policymakers' attitudes towards Goulart more ambivalent. The US role in 1964 has to be seen in light of US domestic

politics after the end of World War II, as well as the history of US foreign policy tactics in Latin America in the same period.

In US domestic politics, there was a move to the right in the 1950s and early 1960s, as the progressivism of the New Deal was replaced by militarism, conformism, and anti-Communism within the confines of a 'Southern cage' around the US political establishment. In foreign policy, US confidence that it could entice revolutionary governments towards the centre, as it had after the 1952 Bolivian revolution, gave way to an increasingly aggressive approach to leftwing governments in Latin America. This was because the tactics used in Bolivia were perceived as having failed to moderate the 1959 Cuban revolution. This led to a switch of US emphasis from economic incentives to the destabilisation and replacement of recalcitrant governments. The Brazilian coup was the beginning of a wave of similar US actions in Latin America.

This article also argues that recently declassified US documents show that US policy-makers did not have a high degree of knowledge of Brazil or its politics. They considered a variety of different possible political outcomes in Brazil, and sought to restrict President Goulart's autonomy to challenge what they regarded as US strategic and economic interests. As late as the end of 1963, US advisors lacked confidence in the ability and willingness of the Brazilian military to carry out a successful coup against Goulart. Furthermore, none of the leading figures in the post-coup government in Brazil seem to have been well known to Presidents Kennedy or Johnson, or their advisors. The documents do not reveal an efficient and well-planned conspiracy against Goulart. Instead, they show a haphazard series of US reactions to events that were seen as surprising and confusing at the time. In the end, the White House declared the 1964 coup a great victory for US interests, but this victory coincided with those of significant domestic forces in Brazil.

Against those who argue that the US decided to overthrow Goulart in 1961 or 1962, this article distinguishes between the destabilisation of the Goulart government and the decision to assist in Goulart's removal. The US documents declassified up to now reveal that the US did not throw its weight definitively behind the coup plotters until 1963, after the failure of Robert Kennedy's attempt to persuade Goulart to meet US demands in December 1962. The US role in the coup was not the result of ineluctable economic or strategic forces. US officials might have accepted President Goulart seeing out his term if, for example, he had complied with their demands to remove leftists from his government and adjust his economic policies in favour of US economic interests. This interpretation, of course, must remain provisional until more US government documents – and perhaps Brazilian ones as well – are declassified.

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