

Digital Resources: Opening the Archives Digital Collection on the History of US–Brazilian Relations

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Subject: History of Brazil, Digital Innovations, Sources, and Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Summary and Keywords

The Opening the Archives Digital Collection on the history of US–Brazilian relations contains 50,000 documents about the two countries during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985) at the height of the Cold War. Student researchers, under the leadership of James N. Green, Professor of Brazilian History and Culture at Brown University, have scanned and indexed thousands of records from the presidential libraries of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, as well as from the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Department, among other institutions and organizations. This digital archive affords researchers access to U.S. sources that register the decisions of Washington policymakers as they responded to the rise of radicalism in the early 1960s and the establishment of an authoritarian regime in 1964, which lasted twenty-one years. Materials include documentation on U.S. economic and military aid programs, analyses of the political situation in Brazil, and evaluations of the opposition to the generals in power. Other archives record U.S. labor organizations' programs directed toward Brazilian trade unions. A collection of dossiers registering information on high-ranking Brazilian military officers, which was compiled by the U.S. Defense Department, provides insights into the relations between the Pentagon and the Brazilian Armed Forces. With the ultimate goal of publishing 100,000 records, the project reflects Brown University's deep commitment to fostering collaborative relationships in international research projects while strengthening the university's goal of becoming a leading center for the study of Brazil in the United States. Designed to give universal open access to these archives for researchers, the project is sponsored by Brown University Libraries in partnership with the State University of Maringá, Paraná, and Bem-te-vi Diversidade in São Paulo.

Keywords: US–Brazilian relations, US foreign policy, Brazil, Brazilian military dictatorship, US National Archive and Records Administration (NARA), Cold War, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Jimmy Carter

US–Brazilian Relations in US Archives

Since around 2010 many historians in Brazil, the United States, and other parts of the world have focused on rethinking the history of the Brazilian military dictatorship in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s within a transnational framework. Reviewing and reading sources from new perspectives is one of the ways that scholars are reassessing this period. Although the Internet and the digitization of documents now offer immediate access to many archives

that once required expensive research trips to other cities and countries, a significant amount of material is only available through on-site visits.

Such is the case of the extensive number of documents on Brazil housed at the National Archive II in College Park, Maryland, and the presidential libraries scattered throughout the United States. The National Archive and Record Administration (NARA) has made available selected documents regarding the relationship between Brazil and the United States during the Cold War, but there are hundreds of thousands of documents about Brazil—airgrams, reports, memos, correspondences, and other items—preserved in the archives of US government agencies, which followed developments in the country and sponsored programs in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Others have been collected in the presidential libraries of the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations, as well as in other archives in the Washington, DC area, or elsewhere in the United States.²

The Opening the Archives Digital Project is a multi-year effort to systematically digitize, index, and make available on an open-access website of the Brown University Libraries 100,000 such documents in order to provide researchers in Brazil and around the world the ability to carry out transnational studies of Brazil, focusing on the period at the height of the Cold War when the US government offered economic, military, and political support to the generals that ruled the country for twenty-one years. NARA has microfilmed State Department records on US–Brazilian relations from the turn of the 20th century until the beginning of the Kennedy administration. However, budget restraints make it unlikely that documents from the early 1960s until mid-1985, which is the focus of the Opening the Archives Digital Project, will be preserved and made available to the public in the foreseeable future through this medium. Thus, the project's focus on greater accessibility through digitization and the Internet also responds to the importance of document preservation, albeit in a digital format.

A Brief History of US–Brazilian Relations

The United States and Brazil have had a long, complicated, and intimate relationship. The United States recognized the Kingdom of Brazil on May 26, 1824, less than two years after the country had declared independence from Portugal, when President James Monroe received José Silvestre Rebello as Brazil's Chargé d'Affaires to the United States. Throughout the 19th century, American consumers' increasing taste for coffee stimulated the expansion of the production of Brazil's most important export crop.³ In 1893, President Grover Cleveland sent battle-ships to Brazil when naval officers revolted against the newly established republic soon after the overthrow of the monarchy. While Cleveland publicly declared that the United States was neutral toward the rebellious forces, the US military action ended up supporting the republican government.⁴

By the turn of the 20th century, the two nations had developed close commercial ties. Brazil joined the Allies during World War II and sent 25,000 troops to Italy to fight against the Axis powers. In exchange for joining the war effort and allowing the US government to build naval and air force bases in Brazil, the State Department facilitated technological support and capital investment for the establishment of a government-owned steel industry in Brazil.⁵ Brazil received three-fourths of all US lend–lease aid for Latin American countries during World War II. For its part, the US government helped Brazil obtain a seat on the Security Council of the newly formed United Nations.⁶

The “special relationship” between the two countries continued after World War II, as US cultural, economic, and political influence in Brazil increased. US consumer goods, music, and films became commonplace.⁷ US invest-

ments grew as well, and close military relations, which were consolidated during World War II, deepened as Brazil joined the Cold War on the side of Washington policymakers. The Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations sought a strong, lasting alliance with Brazil as a means of preventing communist or radical nationalist governments from coming to power in that country or others in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁸ As the Cold War played out in the region in the 1950s and 1960s, especially after the Cuban Revolution, some Brazilian presidents embraced US foreign policy while others defended an independent “third way” between the East and the West.

However, in the early 1960s, relations between the United States and Brazil soured. In August 1961, after serving only eight months as president, conservative politician Jânio Quadros unexpectedly resigned from office. Military forces tried to block Vice-President João Goulart, a cattle rancher and leader of the center-left Brazilian Labor Party (Partido Trabalhista Brasileira), from assuming the presidency, but were unsuccessful. In the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Washington considered that Goulart was an unreliable ally of the United States, given his nationalist discourse, independent foreign policy, and pragmatic relations with socialist and communist trade unionists. As early as August 1962, Lincoln Gordon, the US ambassador to Brazil, and President John F. Kennedy agreed that if Brazilian generals moved to oust Goulart from power, the White House would back their efforts.⁹ In late 1962 the threat by Goulart to turn to the Soviet Union for aid should the US government fail to offer assistance for Brazil’s Three-Year economic plan strengthened Washington’s determination to oust Goulart from power.¹⁰ In the subsequent year and a half, the US government actively engaged in activities to destabilize the Goulart government. The CIA clandestinely intervened in the 1962 elections in favor of anti-Goulart forces and financed anti-communist middle-class mobilizations and conservative religious groups that defended private property, Christian values, and the traditional family.¹¹

The Generals in Power

Goulart’s demise on April 1, 1964 and the armed forces’ rise to power have been amply documented by historians.¹² Yet it was more than a decade after the *coup d’état* that the public found out about the actual behind-the-scenes military and diplomatic support of the US government in overthrowing Goulart. In 1977, Phyllis Parker, a graduate student carrying out research for her Master’s thesis at the University of Texas, Austin, inadvertently discovered Operation Brother Sam, which was mentioned in State Department documents that she reviewed soon after the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library had declassified them.¹³ Official communications between Washington and Rio de Janeiro revealed that President Johnson had authorized the dispatch of a US Navy task force, led by an aircraft carrier and two guided missile destroyers, as well as the deployment of tankers containing motor oil, gasoline, and other materials, to support the generals should a civil war break out between pro-Goulart groups and the armed forces. The White House also had 110 tons of ammunitions and tear gas readied to be airlifted to Brazil, should it prove necessary.

The anticipated civil outbreak did not occur, and Washington policymakers quickly and discreetly withdrew the military task force. At the urging of Ambassador Gordon, President Johnson immediately recognized the armed forces’ takeover and offered significant foreign loans and other forms of aid to support the new military regime.¹⁴ Washington gave unconditional support to General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964–1967), who was chosen by the military to assume the presidency. Two years later in a Senate hearing to confirm his appointment as Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs, former Ambassador Gordon committed perjury by declaring: “the movement which overthrew President Goulart was a purely, 100 percent—not 99.44—but 100 percent a

purely Brazilian movement. Neither the American Embassy nor I personally played any part in the process whatsoever.”¹⁵ Ample documentation that researchers can access in the Opening the Archives Digital Project clearly contradicts his claims.

Immediately after the 1964 *coup d'état*, President Johnson secured congressional support for the undemocratic transition in a closed-door meeting that convinced legislators that Brazil had been on the verge of a communist revolution, an assessment that was far from reality. Thus, Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, who opposed Johnson's Vietnam War policies, took to the floor of the US Senate on April 3, 1964, offering his “high compliments to the President of the United States” for recognizing the regime.¹⁶ A year later, after the generals cancelled direct presidential elections and disbanded the traditional political parties, Senator Morse, disillusioned with US foreign policy toward Brazil, began to criticize the Johnson administration for supporting the authoritarian regime.¹⁷ For their part, the Brazilian generals made a special effort to retain vestiges of democratic governance, such as allowing the formation of a new opposition political party, holding local and state elections, and maintaining a functioning Congress, although it had reduced powers. However, when faced with significant opposition, they constantly changed the rules of the game through presidential decrees to stay in power. Over the course of twenty-one years, five four-star generals presided over the country, attempting to offer the appearances of democratic governance while retaining arbitrary dictatorial powers.

The US government offered significant economic and military aid immediately after the military came to power in 1964 through the Alliance for Progress program, and the generals' economic policies favored expanding foreign investments in the country.¹⁸ By 1968 inflation was brought under control and the economy began to expand at an annual rate of 11 per cent, which won over significant sectors of the Brazilian population, especially the middle classes, to the military's rule.

Increased Repression

In spite of an improving economy, mounting resistance to the military government, especially by students, sectors of the Catholic Church, and the legal opposition, polarized the country in 1968.¹⁹ The Central Intelligence Agency closely followed developments in Brazil and warned about radicalization among Brazilian youth.²⁰ Increased student mobilizations, wildcat labor actions, and vocal congressional opposition, among other forms of protest against the second general chosen to be president, Artur de Costa e Silva (1967–1969). This led to a government crackdown in December 1968 and the issuance of Institutional Act No. 5 that closed Congress, suspended habeas corpus, expanded government censorship, and gave the green light for military and police personnel to increase the use of torture as a means of extracting information from oppositionists and creating a culture of fear among those considering supporting any militant actions against the regime.²¹ As Richard M. Nixon prepared to assume the presidency, liberal State Department officials debated how to respond to this turn to more authoritarian measures, and eventually placed US foreign assistance “under review.” However, several months after Nixon was inaugurated, his administration resumed economic and military aid and warmly received President Emílio G. Médici (1969–1973), the third of the five generals to rule the country, at a White House ceremony in December 1971. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger played an important role in maintaining a close relationship between Washington and the Brazilian military.²²

As reports of gross violations of human rights circulated internationally, activists in the United States and Europe stepped up campaigns against the widespread and systematic use of torture by the Brazilian state.²³ In the after-

math of the Watergate investigations and Nixon's resignation as president, congressional Democrats forced the new Ford administration to begin monitoring human rights abuses, a measure that increased when Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 on a platform that included a criticism of previous administrations' complicity in repressive measures against the opposition. First Lady Rosalynn Carter's visit to Brazil in 1977 provoked a sharp reaction by the fourth Brazilian military president, Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979) against alleged US government meddling in internal affairs, although they had welcomed such interference fifteen years previously. A presidential visit the following year in which Carter expressed his opposition to human rights abuses committed by the Brazilian government created further tensions between the two countries. President Ernesto Geisel also distanced his administration from the United States by breaking a twenty-five-year-old military agreement with the United States and signing a nuclear accord with the Federal Republic of Germany.²⁴

A slow-motion process of liberalization, initiated by Geisel in 1974 and accelerated by increasing opposition to military rule, led to an amnesty law in 1979 under President João Figueiredo (1979–1985) that freed most political prisoners and allowed thousands of others to return from exile. The law, however, shielded those state agents involved in torture and the disappearance of oppositionists from any criminal prosecution for gross violations of human rights.²⁵

Renewed mobilizations of students in the mid-1970s, combined with the emergence of new social movements of feminists, black activists, and LGBT groups, pushed for an expansion of democracy. A wave of strikes between 1978 and 1980 in the industrial belt around the city of São Paulo challenged the regime's economic and labor policies as a new set of more militant labor leaders, including Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, assumed a prominent role in the opposition to the dictatorship. In 1982, opposition candidates won the gubernatorial offices in the country's most important states, and the Congress shifted slightly more to the left. Although mobilizations of millions of people throughout Brazil in 1984 demanding that the dictatorship hold direct presidential elections failed to achieve that goal, in 1985 the military left power. José Sarney (1985–1989), who had supported the regime but then on the eve of its demise shifted to the opposition, became president when Tancredo Neves, who led the opposition ticket during the indirect election by the Brazilian Congress, was hospitalized immediately prior to his inauguration and was unable to begin his term in office. In 1988, a new Constitution marked the beginning of a new democratic regime. The following year direct presidential elections were held for the first time since 1960.

Structure of the Collection

Researchers can access documents relating to US–Brazilian relations during the period 1964–1985 through keyword searches or by browsing records from the different collections: State Department, Defense Department, Presidential Libraries, American Institute for Free Labor Development, Central Intelligence Agency, and more. Documents can be read in full text on line (with optional magnification via the Mirador Viewer) or downloaded as pdfs. Extensible metadata is available for each item.

The Cold War context comes to mind, for example, when one searches the word “Communist,” which brings 872 results, or “Communism,” which brings 1,058 results. (Incidentally, truncating the term to “Communis*” in the hope of catching both of the aforementioned terms produces zero hits.) The keyword “student” or “students” brings 805 results. Given the era of staunch suppression of resistance to military rule, the user will not be surprised to find 246 results for the term “subversive.” Likewise, in an era of guerrilla warfare, there are currently sixty-eight results for the keyword “guerrilla.”

For most research topics, the State Department collection contains the largest set of documents about US–Brazilian relations. They include Department of State incoming and outgoing communications with US diplomatic and consular offices in Brazil; foreign diplomatic and consular offices in the United States; and other US government agencies, private organizations, and the public. This collection also includes internal memoranda and reports. The records are divided into seven broad subject categories: Administrative (ADMN); Consular (CON); Culture and Information (CUL); Economic (ECON); Political and Defense (POL); Science (SCI); and Social (SOC).

By far the largest set of documents are located within the Political and Defense (POL) files. They contain cables, telegrams, letters, memoranda, and other communications between the State Department and the US embassy and consular offices in Brazil, as well as copies of communications with other agencies within the US government. The Social (SOC) documents are communications between Washington and the US embassy and consulates in Brazil dealing with social problems, private and public Brazilian organizations addressing social issues, and information about natural disasters, such as floods, that require relief aid. They also include items related to the arrest or kidnapping of US citizens in Brazil, church–state relations, and other social questions.

Most documents relating to US–Brazilian military agreements, arms sales, joint maneuvers, and national security are held within US Defense Department archives. Those documents, associated with the office of the Secretary of Defense within US State Department archives, contain communications between the two departments and the embassy and consulates in Brazil. A wide range of subjects are contained in these documents, including arms and aircraft sales, visits of US ships to Brazil and Brazilian ships to the United States, questions related to US personnel stationed in Brazil, the possible collaboration of Brazil in international peacekeeping forces, and other Defense Department issues that require coordination with the State Department.

In 1947, President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act, establishing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and making it a fully functional intelligence office of the US government. The responsibilities of the CIA include coordinating the nation’s intelligence activities, engaging in overt and covert actions around the world, and evaluating and disseminating intelligence affecting national security. Given the sensitive nature of its work and the length of time before documents can be declassified, most CIA records are retained by the agency for a longer period of time than for most other agencies of the US government. Even after the records are transferred to NARA, many remain classified and are still not available to the public.

From the mid-1930s until at least the end of the Brazilian dictatorship in 1985, US military officials at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) maintained a set of dossiers tracking the “Who’s Who” of the Brazilian military. The DIA was created within the US Department of Defense in 1961, specializing in defense and military intelligence. These Military Intelligence Unit (MIU) files include biographical data, newspaper clippings, summaries of conversations, and reports on the actions, decisions, temperament, and political inclinations of 418 senior Brazilian military officials, providing US military and civilian decision-makers with the information that defined interactions between the North and South American giants for more than half a century.

The presidential libraries contain documents generated by or related to White House activities during the course of the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations. Among the documents found in these collections are records of the National Security Council, reports of the Central Intelligence Agency, and documents that originated in the offices of special assistants on national security matters in various executive departments and agencies, specifically those pertaining to foreign affairs, national defense, and those relating to diplomatic and military posts around the world. The collections also contain information on presidential visits, meetings with foreign

dignitaries, and issues relating to foreign policy and various forms of US government aid coordinated through the White House. Most of the material from the Reagan administration is not yet declassified.

The Opening the Archives Project is currently requesting Mandatory Reviews on more than 1,000 documents that have been partially or entirely withheld from public view due to security considerations. The collection retains individual registers indicating which documents have been withdrawn.

Pedagogical Use of the Archives

In addition to being a vital resource for researchers wishing to access US government and other documents about Brazil through the Internet, the Opening the Archives Digital Collection has proven to be a valuable educational tool for students learning about US foreign policy and international relations. Students taking courses in history, political science, and international relations have found these materials to be an easily accessible way of examining a specific topic or theme through the evaluation and analysis of primary documents produced to shape foreign policies. They are also a useful instrument for understanding political, social, economic, and cultural processes taking place in Brazil during the military dictatorship, especially from the perspective of US policymakers. Learning to read and interpret government documents in relationship to current scholarship allows students to appreciate the complexities of US foreign policy in relation to an authoritarian regime and to a nation that has been a close ally of the United States for over a century. The collaborations and tensions between the two countries also reveal the contradictions between official US government discourse in favor of democratic regimes and the actual foreign policy practice of different administrations in relation to the Brazilian military regime.

Discussion of Related Research Tools

One of the significant uses of the Opening the Archives material is the opportunity to search large numbers of documents throughout different collections, a daunting task prior to the digitalization and indexing of State Department and other materials. This allows scholars to cross-reference themes from disparate US government archives. For those scholars unable to travel to Washington, DC or the presidential libraries dispersed throughout the United States, open access to this documentation is a democratizing opportunity for those with fewer resources for research in foreign archives. In addition to being able to carry out close readings of day-to-day internal debates among Washington policymakers, US government documents offer insights into how State Department and other officials understood the political, social, economic, and cultural developments in Brazil.

Scholars have tended to use official documents to understand macro policy matters; a close reading of these materials can offer a more quotidian understanding of how US officials understood the country. US government-generated documents can also be additional sources for determining the ways that Brazilian government officials and military leaders themselves comprehended the political situation in Brazil, even though these observations are filtered through US sources. For example, US military attachés were tasked with obtaining information about internal divisions within the Brazilian armed forces. Through a close reading of the Military Intelligence Unit dossiers that contain information about Brazilian officers, one can learn what members of the armed forces were thinking as well as the ways that the US government analysts interpreted the information that they received from Brazilian sources.

Links to Digital Materials

Brasil Nunca Mais Digit@l.

Memórias da Ditadura.

National Security Archive.

Further Reading

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Find this resource:

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(2.) These include the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States in Washington, DC and the archives of the American Institute for Free Labor Development at the University of Maryland, College Park.

(3.) For a concise overview of Brazilian history, see Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an annotated collection of 120 documents on Brazil, see James N. Green, Victoria Langland, and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (eds.), *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

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