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Review by Margaret Power, Illinois Institute of Technology

Felipe Pereira Loureiro’s engrossing article asks and answers an important question: “Why did Washington take a hard stance towards [Brazilian President João] Goulart?” (63). In posing the question, Pereira Loureiro challenges the assumption that U.S. government opposition to the Goulart government was inevitable. In fact, as he shows, the attitudes of U.S. officials toward the Brazilian government were neither uniform nor fixed; they evolved over time, as did those of the Goulart government toward Washington.

In late 1962 Goulart introduced the Three-Year Plan, which Brazilian economist Celso Furtado had designed. The Plan aimed to “decrease rising levels of inflation and reverse external disequilibria without compromising growth” and “[address] Brazil’s deep-rooted poverty and income inequality” (62). To succeed, however, the Plan needed U.S. aid. Although the Plan aligned closely with the program and goals of the Alliance for Progress, the U.S. government refused to back it. Brazil’s economy was the largest in Latin America and its economic stability or lack thereof effected the economic and political solidity of the content. The U.S. government presumably should have supported the Plan, but it did not do so. Washington’s decision to deny Brazil the money it needed effectively sabotaged the Plan, which led to heightened economic instability, and, a little over a year later, contributed to the 1964 military coup that overthrew the Goulart government.

To explain what appears to be the U.S. government’s somewhat perplexing decision to deny Brazil the assistance it required, Pereira Loureiro undertook a close reading of U.S. diplomatic correspondence, attitudes, and decisions during the decisive months of September to December 1962. He concludes that the U.S. government’s determination to not support the Three-Year Plan and, by extension, the Goulart government, was fundamentally political. U.S. concerns about the economic feasibility of the Plan existed, but they were not decisive.

Instead, Pereira Loureiro argues, the political context of late 1962, combined with U.S. government officials’ assessment of the Goulart government, determined policy toward the South American nation and explain why
Washington declined to support the economic powerhouse of the region. As is well known, the watchwords for U.S. government policy toward Latin America following the 1959 Cuban Revolution were ‘No More Cubas!’ Unfortunately for him, Goulart presented the Three-Year Plan in October 1962, during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Pereira Loureiro’s article makes clear the litmus test for receiving U.S. aid at that time was whether or not a government backed U.S. policy toward Cuba. By supporting self-determination for Cuba and opposing U.S. intervention in the island, the Goulart government effectively failed the test. Further, U.S. diplomats disapproved of Goulart’s friendly relations with the Brazilian Left. The conclusion: no U.S. aid for Brazil.

One other factor influenced Washington’s decision. Goulart threatened U.S. officials that if they did not give his government the assistance he requested, he would sever relations with the United States and seek support from the Soviet Union. This announcement, Pereira Loureiro reports, “produced shock waves in Washington” (70). U.S. Ambassador Gordon met with Brazil’s Finance Minister Santiago Dantas, who attempted to appease Gordon by distancing his Ministry from the Furtado plan and indicating his agreement with the U.S. proposal to finance major infrastructural and industrial projects instead. Despite Dantas’s attempts to accommodate the United States, and Goulart denying that he would blackmail Washington, relations between the two countries frayed. The only way they would be repaired, from the U.S. point of view, was if Goulart agreed to “pursue immediate political changes in exchange for U.S. assistance” (72). And this Goulart refused to do.

Pereira Loureiro’s explanation as to why Goulart would not acquiesce to U.S. demands is both cogent and illuminating. It offers a new and compelling interpretation of why Goulart responded the way he did, and, as a result, makes an important contribution to the historiography of Brazilian history in the early 1960s, U.S-Brazilian relations at the same time, and the multiple factors that led to the 1964 military coup. In addition to being a nationalist, Goulart was both a protégé and admirer of President Getúlio Vargas (1930, 1951-1954). When Goulart told the U.S. government that if they did not give him the aid he sought, he would obtain it from the Soviet Union, he believed he could adapt a page from Vargas’s 1940s playbook. He was wrong. The political context of the early 1960s was radically different from what it had been two decades earlier.

In the early 1940s, Vargas convinced the United States to grant Brazil economic aid by warning them that if they did not his government would seek it from Nazi Germany. At a time when Nazi submarines penetrated the Caribbean and pro-fascist organizations operated throughout the hemisphere, the United States could not afford to lose such a potentially powerful ally. To prevent Brazil from siding with the Nazis, the U.S. government agreed to give the South American nation the money it needed to pursue its industrialization projects.

However, in the fall of 1962 the United States was in a different position vis-à-vis Brazil than it had been twenty years earlier. Pereira Loureiro’s careful reconstruction of the period and numerous exchanges between the U.S. and Brazilian government highlights just how different the two political contexts were, despite Goulart’s belief and hope that he could replicate Vargas’s earlier success. The geopolitical realities of the early 1940s strengthened Vargas’s hand, just as those of late 1962 weakened Goulart’s. In the 1940s Nazi power was at its zenith, it had not yet suffered defeat, and Nazi troops occupied or threatened to invade much of Europe. In the autumn of 1962, the United States had challenged the Soviet Union over the missiles in Cuba, and the Soviet Union had agreed to remove them. Thus, the United States considered itself the winner and concluded that it owed its victory to its military superiority and decisiveness.
Further, both the United States and Vargas governments realized that a significant number of Brazilian military officers supported the Nazis. In the 1960s, many if not most officers were strongly anti-Communist. Thus, although the possibility that Vargas would seek aid from the Nazis would not have provoked a negative reaction within the armed forces, the idea that Goulart would spurn the United States in favor of the Soviet Union would. These two key differences undermined Goulart’s maneuvering room and undercut the potency of his threat to seek Soviet assistance, a reality of which both governments were well aware.

Pereira Loureira’s thorough research and his careful reconstruction of U.S.-Brazilian relations in the early 1960s have produced an article that is rich in detail and significant in its implications. He convincingly establishes that the conclusion we largely believe to have been foregone – that the confrontation and antagonism between the nationalistic and progressive Goulart government and the anti-Communist Kennedy administration were inevitable—was, in fact, the result of multiple factors. Nor did the officials of either government operate as a monolithic body; they did not consistently hold the same opinions or respond in the same manner.

In many ways, the Goulart administration was caught between a rock and a hard place. Brazil lacked the resources and bargaining chips necessary to successfully challenge the United States. Despite the strength of its economy in relation to the rest of Latin America, it continued to be dependent on the United States. Although Brazil’s turn to the Soviet Union would have pleased the Left and workers’ movements, it would have alienated the military, and we know what that meant.

This article reflects and contributes to recent historiography that emphasizes the role Latin American governments have played in shaping their nation’s politics.¹ Despite the odds stacked against it, the Goulart government developed its own economic plan and opposed U.S. efforts to block it. But, unfortunately, the political realities the Goulart administration faced were far different from those the Vargas government had confronted. As a result, the U.S. government could and did ignore Brazil’s attempts to determine its own economic program, which undermined the Goulart government and helped prepare the path to his overthrow a few months later.

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