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Is the US Behind the Brazilian Coup?

By Ted Snider
June 5, 2016

There can no longer be a defense of the removal of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff from office. The political maneuvering by the opposition PSDB has been uncloaked and revealed for what it clearly was all along: a quiet coup dressed in the disguise of democracy.

The recent release of a recording of a phone call has done for Brazil what Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs Victoria Nuland's phone call to American ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt did for Ukraine: it has provided incontrovertible proof that the removal of the elected President was a coup.

The published transcript of the call between Romero Jucá, who was a senator at the time of the call and is currently the planning minister in the new Michael Temer government, and former oil executive, Sergio Machado, lays bare "a national pact" to remove Dilma and install Temer as President. Jucá reveals that, not only opposition politicians, but also the military and the Supreme Court are conspirators in the coup. Regarding the military's role, Jucá says, "I am talking to the generals, the military commanders. They are fine with this, they said they will guarantee it." And, as for the Supreme Court, Glenn Greenwald reports that Jucá admits that he "spoke with and secured the involvement of numerous justices on Brazil's Supreme Court." Jucá further boasted that "there are only a small number" of Supreme Court justices that he had not spoken to.

What the Romero Jucá phone call does not do, unlike the Victoria Nuland phone call, is reveal U.S. involvement in the coup. There is still no definitive evidence that the US is involved in the Brazilian coup. The Jucá transcript does not name the States. Neither did President Rousseff when reporter Glenn Greenwald interviewed her: Dilma pinned the blame securely on the lapel of lower house president Eduardo Cunha.

However, there are three lines of evidence suggestive of US involvement. In chronological order, there is suggestive historical evidence, there is a suggestive pattern of evidence in other Latin American countries, and there is current suggestive evidence in Brazil.

The Historical Evidence

There have been several well noted American coups in Latin America. The most well-known and discussed are the 1954 CIA overthrow of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz and the 1973 overthrow of Chile's Salvador Allende. But the little known 1964 Brazilian coup was significant and deserves more discussion.

Noam Chomsky explains that in 1962, Kennedy made the policy decision to transform the militaries of Latin America from defending against external forces to "internal security" or, as Chomsky puts it "war against the domestic population, if they raised their heads." The Brazilian coup is significant because it may have been the first major manifestation of this shift in America's Latin American policy. The Kennedy administration prepared the coup, and it was carried out shortly after Kennedy's assassination. Chomsky says that the "mildly social democratic" Goulart government was taken out for a "murderous and brutal" military dictatorship.

Though not often included in the list of significant US coups, the evidence that it was a US coup is solid. The CIA station in Brazil's field report shows clear US foreknowledge of the coup: "a revolution by anti-Goulart forces will definitely get under way this week, probably in the next few days." President Johnson gave Undersecretary of State George Ball and Assistant Secretary for Latin America Thomas Mann the green light to participate in the coup: "I think we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do".

And the steps were substantial. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon told CIA director John McCone, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk that those steps should include "a clandestine delivery of arms . . . pre-positioned prior any outbreak of violence" to the coup forces as well as shipments of gas and oil. Gordon also told them to "prepare without delay against the contingency of needed overt intervention at a second stage" after the covert involvement. Rusk would then send Gordon a list of the steps that would be taken "in order [to] be in a position to render assistance at appropriate time to anti-Goulart forces if it is decided this should be done." The list, sent in a telegram on March 31, 1964, included dispatching US Navy tankers with petroleum and oil, an aircraft carrier, two guided missile destroyers, four destroyers and task force tankers for "overt exercises off Brazil." The telegram also lists as a step to "assemble shipment of about 11 tons of ammunition."

The significance of this historical record is the demonstration that the last time Brazil had a "mildly social democratic" government, the US cooperated in its removal. The next social democratic government would be the now removed PT government of Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

Pattern of Evidence in Latin America

The next line of evidence, in chronological order, is the recent pattern of the reclamation of Latin America. After a powerful swing to left wing governments in many Latin American countries, America has recently seen to the return swing of the pendulum. Keeping control of her own backyard has long been a policy of no small importance to America. America has long seen Central and South America as its own backyard, and it is a rule that you get to play with the things that are in your backyard: like natural resources. Beyond control of America's backyard, the policy has broader implications. As Henry Kissinger put it, if America could not control its own backyard, it could hardly hope "to achieve a successful order elsewhere in the world."

Key to the reclamation of Latin America is the repossession of the post-Chavez Venezuela. With the death of Chavez, the "virus" that "spread contagion" – to return to the imagery of Henry Kissinger – to the rest of Latin America, the US saw the possibility of, once again, exerting its influence in its backyard. But when Chavez' successor, Nicolás Maduro, continued the run of Bolivarian Revolution victories, the dream of an easy repossession was shattered.

Henrique Capriles, Maduro's opponent and America's choice, demanded an audit – an audit Maduro agreed to – though the automatically audited 54% of voting machines found no fault. America was the only country in the world to refuse to recognize the election results. Though Capriles never actually filed his legal challenge, the State Department continued to refuse to recognize the Maduro government as the government of Venezuela. 150 electoral monitors from around the world monitored Venezuela's election, including monitors from the Carter Center.

President Maduro recently declared a state of emergency, accusing the US of conspiring with right wing groups in Venezuela to overthrow his government. Maduro says that "Washington is activating measures at the request of Venezuela's fascist right."

On June 28, 2009, in what was really an extraordinary rendition, Honduras' democratically elected President, Manuel Zelaya, was seized at gunpoint by hooded soldiers and forced onto a plane that, after refueling at the US military base of Palmerola, took him to Costa Rica.

Zelaya says that, that morning, he was the victim of a coup. Almost all of the international community and the Organization of American States (OAS) agree with him. The American position was more noncommittal. The White House never did officially call what happened a coup.

But it was, and they cooperated with it. Most US aid was never fully suspended. Zelaya even says that "after the coup d'état . . . the US has increased its military support to Honduras". The US never withdrew its ambassador. And the US refused to call for Zelaya's return, despite that

call being made by the OAS and the United Nations. Though the OAS refused to recognize the new coup installed president, the Clinton State Department refused to follow it on that course.

Later, the US would insist on recognizing the coup leaders as the winners of an election that the OAS, the Latin American Mercosur trade bloc and the twenty-three Latin American and Caribbean nation strong Rio Group refused to recognize. So illegitimate was the election that the UN refused to even bother monitoring it.

Latin American expert Mark Weisbrot told me in a correspondence that "the Obama administration acknowledged that they were talking to the [Honduran] military right up to the day of the coup, allegedly to convince them not to do it". But, he added, "I find it hard to believe that they couldn't convince them not to do it if they really wanted to: the Honduran military is pretty dependent on the US".

But despite the refusal to call it a coup and the insistence on recognizing the new government as legitimate, the US knew it was a coup. By July 24, 2009, less than a month after the coup, the White House, Clinton and many others were in receipt of a cable sent from the US embassy in Honduras. In an almost comic lack of subtlety that was clearly never meant to be public, the cable is called "Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup". In it, the embassy says "There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup" Their conclusions could not be clearer. Unlike the conclusions that were provided to the American people, the embassy explicitly calls it a "coup" and says that "[t]here is no doubt". And just in case there were any objections, the cable adds that ". . . none of the . . . arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution".

So, the US had foreknowledge of the coup, cooperated in the coup – at least by helping the rendition plane to refuel – and provided cover for the coup.

On the day that Paraguay's democratically elected Fernando Lugo was removed in their right wing coup, the US was negotiating a new military base in Paraguay. The US refused to call it a coup. But it was. As early as 2009, US embassy cables say that Lugo's political opposition has as its goal to "Capitalize on any Lugo missteps" and "impeach Lugo and assure their own political supremacy". The cable notes that to achieve their goal, they are willing to "legally" impeach Lugo "even if on spurious grounds". The US knew it was a coup: they had been tipped off about the strategy and told what it would look like.

The repossession is also at work in Bolivia where WikiLeaks cables reveal that America had approved one hundred and one grants worth over \$4 million to help regional governments "operate more strategically" to push a shift in power from the national government of Evo Morales to regional governments. The idea was to rebalance power and weaken the Morales government.

That Brazil was going to be a part of this Latin American pattern was clear as early as 2005 when, Mark Weisbrot says, the US intervened in Brazilian politics to undermine the PT government.

Current Suggestive Evidence in Brazil

There is also some suggestive, though not conclusive, evidence in Brazil today. Weisbrot says that "there is no doubt that the biggest players in this coup attempt – people like former presidential candidates José Serra and Aécio Neves – are US government allies.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison says that Brazil is awash in financing from American sources, including "CIA-related organizations."

Perhaps the most direct implication is that the very day after the impeachment vote, Senator Aloysio Nunes of the new PSDB government began a three day visit to Washington. Nunes is no small player in the coup government: he was the vice-presidential candidate on the 2014 ticket that lost to President Rousseff and a key player in the effort to impeach President Rousseff in the senate. Nunes scheduled meetings with, amongst others, the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker and Ben Cardin, as well as with Undersecretary of State and former Ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon. Though Nunes denies it, there are reports that his trip to Washington was ordered by Michael Temer.

The willingness to go ahead with the planned meetings with Nunes right after the impeachment vote suggests at least tacit acceptance or approval on the part of Washington.

President Evo Morales of Bolivia has called on the remaining left wing governments of South America to counter American plans to retake control of the region. Morales said, "It is the plan of the American empire that wants to regain control of Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially in South America, and there surely is an ambition to establish a United States presence in these countries and recover subservient governments as a model, as a system."

So far, America has been conspicuously silent about the coup in Brazil.