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Brazil Marks 50th Anniversary of Military Coup

On 50th anniversary, Archive posts new Kennedy Tape Transcripts on coup plotting against Brazilian President Joao Goulart

Robert Kennedy characterized Goulart as a "wily politician" who "figures he's got us by the ---."

Declassified White House records chart genesis of regime change effort in Brazil

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Washington, DC, April 2, 2014 -- Almost two years before the April 1, 1964, military takeover in Brazil, President Kennedy and his top aides began seriously discussing the option of overthrowing Joao Goulart's government, according to Presidential tape transcripts posted by the National Security Archive on the 50th anniversary of the coup d'tat. "What kind of liaison do we have with the military?" Kennedy asked top aides in July 1962. In March 1963, he instructed them: "We've got to do something about Brazil."

The tape transcripts advance the historical record on the U.S. role in deposing Goulart -- a record which remains incomplete half a century after he fled into exile in Uruguay on April 1, 1964. "The CIA's clandestine political destabilization operations against Goulart between 1961 and 1964 are the black hole of this history," according to the Archive's Brazil Documentation Project director, Peter Kornbluh, who called on the Obama administration to declassify the still secret intelligence files on Brazil from both the Johnson and Kennedy administrations.

Revelations on the secret U.S. role in Brazil emerged in the mid 1970s, when the Lyndon Johnson Presidential library began declassifying Joint Chiefs of Staff records on "Operation Brother Sam" -- President Johnson's authorization for the U.S. military to covertly and overtly supply arms, ammunition, gasoline and, if needed, combat troops if the military's effort to overthrow Goulart met with strong resistance. On the 40th anniversary of the coup, the National Security Archive posted audio files of Johnson giving the green light for military operations to secure the success of the coup once it started.

"I think we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do," President Johnson instructed his aides regarding U.S. support for a coup as the Brazilian military moved against Goulart on March 31, 1964.

But Johnson inherited his anti-Goulart, pro-coup policy from his predecessor, John F. Kennedy. Over the last decade, declassified NSC records and recently transcribed White House tapes have revealed the evolution of Kennedy's decision to create a coup climate and, when conditions permitted, overthrow Goulart if he did not yield to Washington's demand that he stop "playing" with what Kennedy called "ultra-radical anti-Americans" in Brazil's government. During White House meetings on July 30, 1962, and on March 8 and October 7, 1963, Kennedy's secret Oval Office taping system recorded the attitude and arguments of the highest U.S. officials as they strategized how to force Goulart to either purge leftists in his government and alter his nationalist economic and foreign policies or be forced out by a U.S.-backed putsch.

Indeed, the very first Oval Office meeting that Kennedy secretly taped, on July 30, 1962, addressed the situation in Brazil. "I think one of our important jobs is to strengthen the spine of the military," U.S. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon told the President and his advisor, Richard Goodwin. "To make 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...[Goulart's] giving the country away to the...." "Communists," as the president finished his sentence. During this pivotal meeting, the President and his men decided to upgrade contacts with the Brazilian military by bringing in a new US military attaché-Lt. Col. Vernon Walters who eventually became the key covert actor in the preparations for the coup. "We may very well want them [the Brazilian military] to take over at the end of the year," Goodwin suggested, "if they can."

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