

Transcript by James G. Hershberg (George Washington University) with assistance from David Coleman and Marc Selverstone (University of Virginia).

Excerpts from John F. Kennedy's conversation regarding Brazil with U.S. Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon on Friday, March 8, 1963 (Meeting 77.1, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston)

(other participants include Secretary of State Dean Rusk; Under Secretary of State George Ball, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Central Intelligence Agency Deputy Director for Plans Richard Helms)

RUSK

...I think the consensus among us at the present time is that that line of action continues to be the proper line of action but it's [unclear] is to have that discussed here today that we are meeting. It's clear that Brazil is a country that we can't possibly turn away from. Whatever happens there is going to be of decisive importance to the hemisphere. We are not in a position at the present time where the situation is sufficiently bad so that all the non-communists or non-totalitarian Brazilians would understand or participate in an effort to overthrow the present regime. We don't have the basis for a clear break between ourselves and Brazil that would be understood throughout the hemisphere. I think that we still—we've got to try to find out whether we cannot try to bring their general political orientation into a more wholesome direction. And secondly, to get the—and more importantly in the short run—to get their economy moving in the direction that will make it possible for both public and private investments from abroad to make a difference. But this is the rough outline. I think that Ambassador Gordon might want to comment on whether he sees any perceptible improvement in the general political atmosphere since the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy] was there [in mid-December 1962]—there are a number of them listed here—but, whether he thinks Mr. [Santiago] Dantas' intent in recent weeks to move toward us in important respects is based on anything very solid, and what we need to demand from them in terms of a political demonstration of the direction in which they plan to go. [unclear]

GORDON

Yes.

JFK

Well, now, let me just say, I've looked—I've read your paper and everything, and it seems to me that—I agree with the secretary that we've got to do something about Brazil. I was wondering—what I was wondering about particularly is, can we string out our assistance in such a way that we never, string all these things out in a sense politically and economically, so that they don't [unclear], get what they need now, [unclear] but we

hold them to it? And secondly, can we use this—I understand that Dantas—as you [Gordon] argue in your paper pretty strongly for stabilization and for a relationship with us against [Leonel] Brizola [the left-wing governor of Rio Grande do Sul and brother-in-law of Goulart]. Can we get Goulart to go more strongly on that or can we get him to do anything about this, the war ministry, and some of these other people that are really communists, that he's playing?

GORDON

Yeah. Well, on the question of the stringing out of aid. We still have to do a lot of homework on what kind of aid program and how we scale it over time, what the conditions would be. The problem of relating continuation of aid to performance, economic performance by them, is not a terribly difficult problem. We have suspended twice now since I've been there because of non-economic performance. This whole scheme is based on the hypothesis [that] they will negotiate something with the International Monetary Fund and the [unclear] itself would have some performance—quite important performance standards in it. The problem of political performance of course is rather hard.

JFK

[unclear] if we do it as far as putting screws on [unclear] them?

GORDON

That's right. But I don't think any of us would have difficulties envisaging some scheme under which month-by-month or certainly quarter-by-quarter we can review performance and if it isn't up to scratch we consider the continuation of aid and stop it, as we have done twice in the last sixteen months. Now political performance I must say is much more puzzling. There...a quest[ion]—a judgment. We can't write a piece of paper which we get them to sign that says that on such a such a day they will fire A, B, and C. This is a matter of continuing pressure. I think it's important what kind of concerns are expressed to Dantas this coming week by you, by the secretary—

JFK

How precise should those concerns be?

GORDON

I'm against your naming names. I have named names—they know whom we're talking about—in private conversations. When the Attorney General was there we discussed this question as to whether we should name names and decided it would be a bad idea. And I think that decision was right and still think that it's right so far as, especially as you're concerned, and I think the secretary also, unless Dantas *invites* the naming of names.

They don't need us to name names; they don't need *you* to name names to know what we're worried about.

RUSK

They could use your naming names as a very powerful weapon against us if they wanted to turn that way.

GORDON

Exactly. But, in the labor field, [unclear] you could name I think generally the presidency, appointments in Brasilia, and, to some extent, and in the military--these are categories—it seems to me that you could and should indicate continuing serious concern. The labor field is especially bad, you spoke to Goulart about the labor field in general terms in April last year when he was here. The attorney general mentioned it. I mentioned it of course frequently [unclear] to time. Goulart keeps saying that he's worried himself about excessive communist influence and wants to do something to reduce it and get it more under control. We just haven't seen any action yet, which indicates a move, an effective move, in that direction. And we have seen continuing actions in the other direction, small but significant. They're bad, this bothers us, it obviously bothers our labor movements very much. Dave Bell reported a pretty strong statement by George Meany this morning in [word unclear] committee. Meany I think takes a grossly exaggerated view but nonetheless this is a serious problem with our own labor movement as well as with our views to the government.

RFK

Let me ask, Mr. Ambassador, in effect, what they did after Goulart saw the president was the opposite to what he indicated to the president he was going to do.

GORDON

Essentially he continued, yeah, that's right—

RFK

Almost the opposite what he—

GORDON

--yeah, continued on same old bad line—that's right.

RFK

Then you have [unclear] group stuck in the relationship with [unclear] movement [unclear]

GORDON

The question of, the question of withdrawing from ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions], the question of continuing to support in the industrial federation groups who were thinking about some sort of a Latin American-wide movement with Cuban communist labor participation. The government's waffled on this. It's not a clear-cut line. They don't always support every communist labor endeavor, not by a long shot, but they certainly do not consistently support anticommunist endeavors. And they keep naming people to various—

RFK

Have they discussed, specifically, the...ICFTU...?

JFK

[Unclear] you asked him about, we are told what we thought would be the troubles if they broke Latin America, that they broke the entire North American labor movement, I don't think he, we have to check the notes to see, why don't you just check the notes of that part of the conversation?

GORDON

Right.

JFK

Why did he do that? What is the explanation for that?

GORDON

His explanation--

RFK

--particularly now, when he's got [unclear] pretty good strong political position, [unclear] can't run for re-election, why did he do that?

GORDON

His explanation up until the plebiscite was that he needed these people to support him against what he thought was a hostile Congress; this was one of the forces he was going

after to get his powers back. Now he doesn't need this any more, and he says he's changing. The point is that we haven't seen it yet—he's only been full president for a few weeks. So we can say that the future is uncertain. But I think it's important that at this time when the future is uncertain we should indicate that we're still very worried about this and that the mere adoption of a strong and, as far as we can tell up to now, a quite promising stabilization and anti-inflation program, *doesn't* satisfy all of our concerns. To some extent it does itself help in this field because the communist party officially and some of the more extreme labor people are opposing the program and if they're really going to stand behind the program they may *have* to separate themselves off from some of this very left-wing labor, labor—

[...]

UNIDENTIFIED VOICES:

Treat you well

So far,...

[JFK?]

His public statements have been what we would want?

And he's been making some of the right—

GORDON

Yes, yes.

RUSK

[unclear]

GORDON

Exactly, exactly. Since I wrote this paper I learned that he the other day he made a television speech in which without naming [Leonel] Brizola he talked about articulate spokesmen opposed to the program who claimed that they were representing the people and who if they got into power would really be fascist dictators who would ruin the country. Everybody knew that he was in fact referring to Brizola. This is all very much to the good.

RUSK

Mr. President, I don't think I mentioned this to you but Dantas was deeply convinced that the American military influence in Brazilian military circles has been dominant and [in?] the direction of the most extreme conservative and rightist elements and that one of the ways that they can act to break that threat of a reimposition of a dictatorship of the right is to change that military leadership. He spoke to me [unclear; at Punte del Este?] record of a very strong US military influence in their own military and not always in what he considered the right direction. I gather he was referring to some people who are not necessarily [unclear] military leaders

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE:

This old marshal could very well be, he may very well be one of the people he has in mind. Well Dantas has said to me on a number of occasions that where he thought where [deposed Argentine President Arturo] Frondizi went wrong was not doing [unclear] with the military, though he hung around for four years and then got thrown out and it's quite clear that he doesn't want to have the same thing happen to Goulart, Goulart doesn't want to have the same thing happen to himself. I think the idea of Goulart wanting friendly officers who keep him [unclear] is a legitimate and respectable one. What is unfortunate is that so many of the officers friendly to Goulart—not Krueger who is a strong anticommunist—but so many of the others seem to be also either communists in a couple of cases or very left-wing inclined and strongly anti-American. If he can find some officers loyal to him but not so hostile to us this would suit us very much better.

[JFK or RFK?]

The anti-Americans are they Communist or left, what would they be?

GORDON

Well there's one, the chief air force man in this group who commands the air zone right around the city of Rio, we think is a communist, outright communist. The senior officer in that group who is the commanding general for the first army also in Rio is not a communist so far as we can tell, but he does play with them, he meets with them from time to time, he's been working also with the sergeants which many officers object to because it's counter to normal military discipline. He's very friendly with this airman that I mentioned before. The chief naval officer in this group who's the head of the, the acting head of the marines—the marine corps is relatively unimportant in Brazil compared to what it is here though it's of some significance—he also is very far to the left—whether a communist party member or not I'm not sure but awfully close. So that—

JFK

Being promoted by Goulart, these fellows?

GORDON

Yes, yes. Now the chief fellow reaches retirement age at his present ranking in June or July of this year. It's one reason he wanted so badly to be war minister because if he's war minister he doesn't have to retire. But there's still an open question as to three months off, there's still an open question as to what will happen to him [excision 1: 19 seconds excised] but there's still some possibility of Goulart remaining minister of war, and this would be regarded by the bulk of the officer corps as a terrific blow to their general morale and cohesion. Goulart defended this kind of thing essentially on the ground that he sees what happened in Argentina and Peru during the course of the last few months and he doesn't want it to have it happen to him. But as I say there does seem to be a difference between people who are personally loyal to him on the one hand and the coincidence of this with people who are playing a far left-wing game.

[passages not transcribed about economic aid, possible presidential trip to South America, and other issues]

[26:40] JFK:

Well, now, is there anything else that I ought to [unclear]. Do you [RFK] have any thoughts about it?

RFK

Yeah. Briefly I think that we got a lot that they want and I don't know whether there's going to be a lot that they want two or three or four years from now, but I think that they desperately need us, that there have been since our visit there, there have been some changes along the economic field but there were two points that we made at your instructions and with the ambassador: one that they do something in the economic field and the second that there be real reform changes in the political field and that some of these individuals who were vocally anti-United States and pro-communist be removed from office and that people who were less against the United States take their place, that something [unclear] we mentioned specifically the military [deal/field?] and we also mentioned labor, and made the point that of course that labor is the backbone of a free society and here they were encouraging individuals who were communists, who were against the free labor movement of the world, and that this had a very adverse effect. I think that in your conversation at least ... make the point and make it very tough that they're going to have to do something down there, that this is not something that Congress will tolerate, the American people will tolerate, or that you *can* tolerate. I mean, just looking at the list here of some of the people that hold important positions in his government; his press secretary is a communist, the immediate two extreme leftists, a former [word unclear], a communist, is chief of the military—civil and military household, his own immediate office, the presidential cabinet, a number of individuals—now they got some people on the other side, too, and I think that's encouraging but I think that to make sure that it's put home to him about how strongly you feel about it and that Congress, they're just—they're 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 same time puts important communists or people who are very anti-United States in important

positions of power, that they have—at least, maybe here—but 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, and build an Alliance for Progress, and he really hasn't done very much about it. But they could make a hell of a difference, Goulart, by coming out for it, and working with the United States in this field, and nothing's been done, and so I--I just think that, to really make some of these points and make them strong and make them tough...

JFK

[Unclear] you think we ought to be on this reference to communists surrounding him? Or at least ultra-na[tionalist?]-ultra-radical anti-Americans—do you describe them that way rather than communist?

RUSK

Well, I would mention—

GORDON

I'd say, communists and—communists and other extreme left-wing anti-Americans.

JFK

He'll know who we're talking about?

GORDON

Oh, sure.

JFK

That brother-in-law Brizola—

GORDON

Oh, Brizola he'll be happy to discuss with you at length. [words unclear]—

JFK

He doesn't like Brizola?

GORDON

--for a few hours.

No, he's—Brizola has been fighting him publicly.

JFK

Has Goulart ever come out against Brizola?

GORDON

No, and I asked him about this again the last time we had dinner together, a couple of weeks ago, and he gave me a long lecture about it--very interesting. He said, you know that I disagree completely with Brizola, because I've told you this before, and it's even more true now, because Brizola's attacking my program, Dantas, my cabinet and so on, wildly.

He's—this was just before the long Carnival weekend and they were both going down together to São Borja where they come from. He said, "I'm going to try to once more this weekend to convert him but I really think it's hopeless. One of these days we're going to have to have an open public break but there are lot of people who are supporting Brizola who are also supporters of me. If I were to have a break with him today, I'm afraid a lot of those would go with him. I want to manage this in such a way that so when the time comes for an open break most of his supporters will stay with me. This is a subject," he said, "on which I'm very expert, these intricacies of domestic Brazilian politics. Just let me do it my own way."

RFK

[Unclear] Mr. President, I think that, so long as we're not tough with them and require something really specifically be done and that real progress made in this area, it may—he struck me as the kind of wily politician who's not the smartest man in the world but very sensitive to this area, that he figures that he's got us by the—and that he can play it both ways, that he can make the little changes, he can make the arrangements with IT & T and then we give him some money and he doesn't have to really go too far. It's easy—if they get the idea—in my judgment if he gets the idea and gets it continuously that we—this is something that's very serious with us, we're not fooling around about it, we're not going to conyinue, we're giving him some time to make these changes but we can't continue this forever maybe you'd like to personally but you just can't sell Congress or the American people on—that he realizes he can't have it both ways, can't have the communists and put them in important positions and make speeches criticizing 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 just don't have any choice about it. Now you've made great sacrifices up to 30 million dollars now, you're willing to push this but in return from him, because you greatly admire the president you think that the two of you working together can really do a great deal in the Western hemisphere and the two great countries. You're willing to do your part and you're wiling to take on this great struggle and this great fight which is very unpopular in the United States but he's got to do something specifically about these people....

RUSK:

I think there's difference between being in a position of saying, "We know how Brazil ought to be run," and putting it in terms of your problems here and getting the job done here, in terms of progress on Brazil [unclear] very important, because that was with [unclear] on the first point. But he must see the second point...

[...]