

The Personalities of the Military Dictators After 1964 and the Country That Emerged from Them

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VASCONCELLOS Filho, Leôncio de Aguiar. The Personalities of the Military Dictators After 1964 and the Country That Emerged from Them. American Society of History, Arts and Letters, 2026. Disponível em:

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Área: Produções Acadêmicas

Publicado em 31 de agosto de 2026

There is a popular saying that "against facts there are no arguments". And in the analysis of facts, much emphasis is placed on their consequences, but not on the personalities of those who brought them about. In reviewing the history of Brazil this becomes quite evident, including in relation to the formal leaders after the coup of 1964.

From 1964 to 1985 the country was led by six military governments (common opinion does not usually count the Military Junta that occupied the presidency between Costa e Silva's illness and Médici's inauguration). I shall not write about the three members of the Junta, as this article would grow too long. I shall speak of the five dictators customarily considered: Castelo Branco, Costa e Silva, Médici, Geisel, and Figueiredo.

With the resignation of Jânio Quadros in 1961, the presidency should have passed to his vice president, João Goulart, known as Jango. The military did not accept this, considering him a sympathizer of socialist ideology, and were satisfied only when a parliamentary system was politically stitched together, in which Jango would hold only the powers of head of state. But the same constitutional amendment provided for a plebiscite, a little over a year later, in which voters would decide between the return of presidentialism and the maintenance of parliamentarism. The vast majority chose presidentialism, which ended by investing Jango with the powers of head of government as well. The military, especially the chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, Marshal Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, did not tolerate the situation, and overthrew him in 1964.

Castelo Branco had a short-term vision of the military regime he had just installed. He sincerely wished to purge from political life the people he considered socialists — and, by his lights, undesirable, such as Jango himself and Leonel Brizola, who in 1961 led the armed resistance for Jango's inauguration, the so-called Legality Campaign. He therefore put into force the Institutional Act (later called Institutional Act No. 1), which stripped them, and others, of their political rights. With this and further measures, which would ensure that the country did not later fall under a leftist command, he intended to return the government to civilians. This was not accepted by the hard line, which, through threats, obliged him in 1966 to close Congress temporarily and, in its place, to draft a constitution consolidating the regime, which would come into force in 1967.

One perceives that Castelo was a man of personal practicality, since his goals rejected the political perpetuity of the barracks and were focused on an objective future that interested him. Perhaps because he was an avid intellectual, belonging to the family of the great José de Alencar: he wrote articles, geopolitical essays, and collections, and read compulsively. For him, state political violence was necessary, though excesses were to be avoided. But that practicality and restraint contrasted with the reality of a leader pressed and cornered by the growing monstrosity of the regime he had created. He would pass power to Marshal Arthur da Costa e Silva, of the hard line, on March 15, 1967, the first day the new constitution took effect. He would die months later in a highly suspicious plane crash in Ceará.

Costa e Silva, from the beginning, showed a personality that, for a conservative officer, was dual. He liked flourishes before the press, approaching the stereotype of "Marshal of the People" by appearing at great parties, betting on horse races, and playing poker. His speeches seemed colloquial, often

improvised, and permanently inclined to avoid figures of speech that might "confuse" the masses. Notwithstanding these habits, he declared himself a fervent Catholic, which did not prevent him from strongly repressing student movements, protest marches, and any union assemblies. That severity was personally transmitted through his image of dark glasses and facial gravity, in brutal contrast with those personal customs. He really did separate his private tastes from his role as dictator of the day — so much so that, with the sharpening of armed struggle and of antagonistic speeches in Congress, on December 13, 1968, he issued the infamous Institutional Act No. 5, the AI-5, ending his "populism of manners" and attributing absolute powers to himself. On the basis of the very Act he had signed minutes before, he closed Congress indefinitely and intensified the already biting repression.

With the AI-5, the killing machine was loosed. Perhaps because he was inwardly repentant and shattered, Costa e Silva succumbed to a stroke. The hard line prevented the vice president, Pedro Aleixo, from taking office because he was a civilian and had opposed the AI-5. In his place the presidency was occupied by a Military Junta, which named as successor General Emílio Garrastazu Médici.

Médici did not want to be the leader. The documentation proving it is vast; he accepted only as a duty to the Armed Forces. To that end he demanded that Congress be reopened, and during his administration he would revoke no mandate. Not because he was better than his predecessors, but because he was no born administrator — and it is at this point that the bloodbath his period represented may have emerged: he treated the political class, his ministers included, with absolute distance. He was for much of the time an inaccessible person, silent through most of his meetings, confining himself to giving the final orders. As armed opposition to the AI-5 was at its height, Médici used that same norm to create subsections of repression, such as the DOI-CODI units. But because of his inflexible impersonality, he delegated the tasks of combat to the military ministers, who passed them to subordinates who observed no limits ("to hell, Mr. President, with all scruples of conscience", as a famous minister of Costa e Silva once said).

The killing machine became, definitively, an uncontrollable machine of extermination, to whose atrocities the formal leader "closed his eyes". Of the whole dictatorship period, about ninety percent of the violent deaths and political disappearances occurred in the Médici era. In parallel, Médici was no economist. He thus also gave complete freedom to Delfim Netto, his finance minister, to conduct the economy. The country grew at some thirteen percent a year in that period, and the government used the resulting jingoism — and that of sporting events — to mask the brutality of the cellars, rendering the political dead and disappeared invisible.

Independently of any context, Médici was averse to social life, cultivated modest habits, and was reclusive at home, unlike his great friend and predecessor Costa e Silva. It may be from this that the present popular perception comes, that despite their undeniable authoritarianism the military rulers were more upright in handling public affairs (I shall not enter into that merit, not least because facts of that nature, imagined or real, were obscured by censorship).

Still under Médici, in 1973, came the first international oil crisis and, with it, evidence that the growth resulting from Delfim's economic measures would be checked. Those responsible for the succession therefore nominated General Ernesto Geisel, who would take office on March 15, 1974. Unlike his

predecessor, and as a former president of Petrobras, Geisel had the personal tact to deal with what was coming economically. And that included being a protagonist of *realpolitik*: the world financial situation obliged him to adopt a controlled relaxation, beginning the easing of state political violence until it might eventually disappear, with a consequent return to democracy. Not because he was a "defender of human rights", but in order to avoid a bloody overthrow of the military, which would eclipse the vast developmentalist project of state they had conceived in the early days of the coup.

Since the relaxation was to be "controlled", the machine of extermination had to be controlled as well. The dictator took back for himself the exclusive authority over orders of physical elimination. CIA documents indicate that he gave determinations that "only" extremely dangerous "terrorists" were to be executed. When disobeyed — as in the cases of torture and consequent death of political prisoners at the DOI-CODI of São Paulo — he did not hesitate to dismiss those responsible. This denoted not humanity but selectivity, committed on the model of Castelo's "limited violence".

Administratively, then (and not in the number of deaths caused, in which Médici and Costa e Silva led), he was among the most authoritarian. He used the AI-5 to expropriate several private companies, revoke mandates, and close Congress in 1977, if only for a short period. Unlike Médici, he let personal rancor dictate some courses. For example, when Jango died in Argentine exile in 1976, he created initial obstacles so that the body could not cross the border and the family could not bury him with dignity in his homeland. Earlier that same year he ordered the inexplicable demolition of the Monroe Palace, a jewel of eclectic architecture that further beautified downtown Rio de Janeiro. In private life he was as austere as Médici.

But in spite of everything, the relaxation went on, and he himself abolished the AI-5 at the end of 1978. His successor, General João Figueiredo, had the difficult mission of allowing the return of the exiles and leading the country to democracy — ironically without the absolute powers once used by his predecessors to oppress, and which now might have been directed at containing the hardliners who, execrating the opening, committed destabilizing terrorist attacks, as in fact they did. Figueiredo was, personally, a psychologically explosive man, and he did not spare the authors of those attacks his public threats. But although no one was punished, the transition was completed and the dictatorship came to an end in 1985.

As said, Figueiredo was not exactly an agreeable person. He did not hesitate to mistreat, and greatly, those under his orders, and he uttered phrases of intense disrespect toward the heterogeneous and social characteristics of the population, often bordering on extreme elitism and racism. But despite his recent past as head of military intelligence, he permitted the return of the exiles and brought to the country the lights of democracy. After the inauguration of the first civilian president, asked what he most desired, he answered that he wished to be forgotten.

Figueiredo cannot be forgotten, for he fulfilled what he set out to do when he swore to make this country "a democracy". But the military regime he buried — with its extrajudicial killings, its tortures, its censorship, its violations of property and its debasement of human dignity, as well as its assault on our historical memory — must never be forgotten either. Not out of nostalgia, but because of the awareness

and the repugnance that will fire us never to allow anything similar to happen among us again. "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance", said John Philpot Curran, the celebrated Irish politician and jurist. Let us, as a nation, prove worthy of his wise words.

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Translated from the Portuguese original published by the Academia Brasileira de História e Literatura.

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