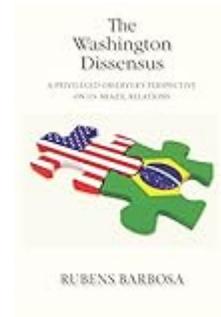




Rubens Antonio Barbosa. *The Washington Dissensus: A Privileged Observer's Perspective on US-Brazil Relations.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8265-2011-1; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8265-2012-8.



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Competitors and Allies: An Insider's Look At US-Brazil Relations

After the embarrassing revelation in September 2013 that the US National Security Agency had tapped the personal phone calls and emails of Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, relations between the two countries froze. In a chain of blistering speeches, Rousseff condemned the spying as a breach of international law, Brazil's sovereignty, and the very institutions of democracy. She also became the first world leader in history to cancel her scheduled state dinner at the White House—an honor Brazil had not received in two decades. While genuine, Rousseff's public ire was driven in part by the need to cater to her left-leaning political base, which is traditionally skeptical of US influence in the region.

For Ruben Barbosa, Brazil's ambassador to Washington from 1999 to 2004, this display of domestic politics' influence on foreign policy decisions is nothing new. In his recent memoir, *Washington Dissensus: A Privileged Observer's Perspective on U.S.-Brazil Relations*, he unpacks the US-Brazil bilateral relationship and reveals the underlying factors driving policy during his tenure. His timely, direct, and balanced account spans

two Brazilian presidential administrations and covers the major foreign policy issues between Brazil and the United States at the turn of the century, among them: the 9/11 attacks; the US invasion of Iraq and Brazil's subsequent vote against in the United Nations; the prolonged and ultimately failed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) process; and the 2002 coup that briefly ousted Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Barbosa does not hide his frustration with the shift in Brazil's policy toward Washington with the onset of the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva administration, noting that starting in 2003, Brazil's foreign policy priorities negatively affected relations with the United States. In contrast to Lula's predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula not only had little interest in deepening relations with the United States, but effectively pitted the developing countries against the developed world. Examples include the creation of South American institutions such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) that excluded the United States, open sympathy for Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, and diplomatic overtures to Libya

and Syria. Needless to say, Lula's reference to Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi as his friend and brother threw fuel on the fire of US misgivings toward Brazil (p. 17). Combined with constant friction within the World Trade Organization (WTO) surrounding the ultimately failed FTAA agreement, a relationship of competition and mistrust ensued.

Brazil's resistance to further cooperation with the United States, Barbosa asserts, stemmed from pressure from the ideological base of the Lula Workers Party, the PT. During Lula's presidency, the leadership of Itamaraty—Brazil's equivalent to the US State Department—became more ideological and opposed to cooperation with Washington. Barbosa even claims that Brazil could have garnered support for its long-sought-after permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council had Lula played his cards better vis-à-vis Washington. While any US endorsement of a permanent UN seat for Brazil may seem far-fetched for observers, the erosive influence of Itamaraty on the bilateral relationship during Lula's two terms is indisputable.

Washington Dissensus does not critique the Lula administration alone. Barbosa pulls no punches when it comes to his criticism of Washington and its lack of a Brazil policy, especially after the 9/11 attacks in which the already scant attention paid to Latin America diminished even further. Indeed, during the George W. Bush era, the State Department's bureau for the Western Hemisphere did not have a single diplomat on its staff who had lived in Brazil or could have been considered an expert on Brazilian affairs (p. 71). Brazil, according to Barbosa, was handled in the same generic way as the rest of the region. And any Brazil policy that did exist was driven by economic and commercial interests, executed principally by the Federal Reserve and Treasury Department. As for the political/diplomatic arena, the Bush White House displayed a mixture of affinities, suspicions, and reservations toward Brazil (p. 16).

In addition to highlighting the lack of high-level US attention to Brazil, Barbosa directly criticizes President Bush. While lambasting Bush's arrogant unilateralism (p. 131), Barbosa makes sure to reference the president's now infamous verbal gaffes, including his question to Lula whether there were many black people in Brazil, the aforementioned question being particularly embarrassing given that approximately half of Brazilians are of African descent, brought about by a slave trade notably larger than that of the United States.

Perhaps Barbosa's most significant contribution to

our understanding of US-Brazil relations is his demonstration that the bilateral relationship is just that—bilateral. All too often, Washington is criticized for ignoring Brazil, or reverting to a policy of benign neglect. While official knowledge and understanding of Brazil within the beltway remains surprisingly weak, Barbosa shows us that the relationship is a two-way street, and that Brasilia is just as responsible as Washington for bilateral misunderstanding, frustration, or dissensus. Yes—US policy toward Brazil is still based on blurred visions, myths, stereotypes, and distortions of reality (p. 22). But the Lula administration shied away from a clear US willingness to strengthen ties. And Brazil is the only major emerging nation that lacks a strategy toward Washington, perhaps because the Brazilian government does not have a clear notion of what to extract from its relationship with the United States (p. 22). In that vein, the absence of a special relationship between the two countries cannot be attributed to the United States alone.

Washington Dissensus also correctly emphasizes the crucial role of personalities in the world of politics. Policy decisions are not made in a rational-actor vacuum, but rather by human beings influenced by their own personal histories, preferences, and personalities. Given the unilateralism of the Bush administration and Bush's ignorance of Brazil, coupled with the PT's traditional antipathy toward the United States, the ultimate friendship between Bush and Lula was shocking to many. However, both leaders were direct and straightforward, and less intellectual than their predecessors. Personal affinities, argues Barbosa, to a greater or lesser degree, helped establish a relationship that fostered solutions for issues in the national interests of both nations (p. 65). That is, any steps forward between the two countries were helped by the personal connection between the two presidents. Along that same vein, the lukewarm personal relationship between presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Bush contributed to the failed attempts to institutionalize bilateral cooperation (p. 76).

An added bonus for the reader of *Washington Dissensus* is Barbosa's perspective as a foreigner living in Washington, DC. During the Al Gore hanging chad dispute, Barbosa was fascinated to see how effectively democratic institutions and mechanisms operated in the United States. The strength of the institutions prevailed over all other interests, party-political or otherwise, rightly considered less important than the permanent values of democracy (p. 29). While Americans likely took the continuation of business as normal for granted, this Brazilian observer had a much deeper ap-

preciation for the ability of US democratic institutions to withstand such strain.

Barbosa's observer's perspective is a memoir rather than an academic text. Still, the absence of sources weakens his assertions, especially when referring to foreign policy documents or citing colleagues. Separately, the book often times reads as a who's who list of high-level individuals Barbosa befriended or brushed shoulders with. His references to the various elite clubs in which he dined, or private camps in which foreigners were rarely received were superfluous, and did not bolster his undeniably important role in Washington. Finally, his comparison of the United States's Patriot Act to Brazil's Institutional Act #5 issued by an authoritarian Brazilian dictatorship in 1968 was a stretch, even for the fiercest critics of Bush's antiterrorism law.

However, any shortcomings in Barbosa's memoir are minor for the enthusiast of US-Brazil relations. Barbosa's personal accounts provide a greater understanding of the delicate maneuverings required of an ambas-

sador of a major country. The reader understands the difficulty of Barbosa's biggest obstacle during his term, which was to disabuse the State Department's perception that Brazilian foreign policy during the Cardoso government had an anti-American edge to it, when all we were trying to do was defend our national interests (p. 71). But we also know that Cardoso's successor *did* have this aforementioned anti-American edge.

His memoir is a provocative, fair, and hard-hitting account of the sausage-making of foreign policy. We gain a clear perspective on an ambassador's ultimate hope to broaden and deepen his country's relationship with the United States, while serving two very different Brazilian presidents, confounded by the timeless problem that plagues Brazil: it is neither significant nor threatening enough to sustainably stay on Washington's radar.

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