



The Nixon Administration, Brazil, and
the Campaign against Torture

[Paper Abstract]

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The Nixon Administration, Brazil, and the International Campaign against Torture

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"Make torture as unthinkable as slavery": this was the rallying cry of the global campaign to ban torture in the early 1970s. One of the campaign's earliest targets was the military regime in Brazil, which adopted torture as a tool of state repression in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although torture in Brazil was never as widespread as it would become in Chile under Augusto Pinochet in the aftermath of the 1973 coup or in Argentina under the military junta (1976-1983), the use of torture became the major focus of efforts by opponents to discredit the regime. In many ways Brazil functioned as a pilot project for the more high-profile human rights campaigns that followed, and in the case of Brazil we can trace the genesis and early development of tactics and rhetoric as activists began to create an international politics of human rights.

This essay focuses on the international campaign against torture in Brazil during its initial phase, 1969-1971, and on the U.S. State Department's response to the campaign. I argue that the rhetorical strategy employed by anti-torture advocates had both strengths and weaknesses. It did succeed in identifying Brazil with barbaric repression, and Brazilian leaders found to their dismay that when they travelled to Europe and the United States they were greeted with loud public protests. The campaign's effects on public opinion, then, were significant, and helped to shape the direction and tactics of the more powerful movements that mobilized later in the decade, with momentous effects on the U.S. Congress and the diplomacy of human rights. Its effects on the actual use of torture, however, were minimal. Although I do not attempt here to detail the response of the Brazilian government, it is clear that levels of torture did not substantially decrease during the campaign. (It may be, however, that the campaign's cumulative effects played a small role in the regime's later decision to discontinue the routine political use of torture.) As my analysis of the reaction of State Department officials shows, anti-torture activists influenced the thinking of U.S. government officials primarily in presenting them with an "image problem" that they sought to counter with their own image-shaping strategies, leaving the underlying problem of torture untouched. Yet State Department officials did raise the issue of torture repeatedly with their Brazilian counterparts, suggesting that an active concern with human rights in U.S. diplomacy began earlier than the push most scholars identify as originating around 1973.