



The Accidental President of Brazil: A Memoir

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brian Winter

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Fernando Henrique Cardoso received a phone call in the middle of the night asking him to be the new Finance Minister of Brazil. As he put the phone down and stared into the darkness of his hotel room, he feared he'd been handed a political death sentence. The year was 1993, and he would be responsible for an economy that had had seven different currencies in the previous eight years to cope with inflation that had run at 3000 percent a year. Brazil had a habit of chewing up finance ministers with the ferocity of an Amazon piranha. This was just one of the turns in a largely unscripted and sometimes unwanted political career. In exile during the harshest period of the junta that ruled Brazil for twenty years, Cardoso started his political life with a tentative run for the Federal Senate in 1978. Within fifteen years, and despite himself, this former sociologist was running the country.

And what a country! Brazil, it is often said, is on the edge of modernity, striding with one foot in mid-air towards the future, the other still rooted deep in a traditional past. It is a land of sophisticated music and brutal gold-digging, of the next global superpower and the last old-time coffee plantations. It is gloriously ungovernable, irrepressibly attractive, and home to the family, friends and extraordinary life of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. This is his story and his love song to his country.

The Accidental President of Brazil: A Memoir Details

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Oswaldo De Freitas says

President, intellectual, entertaining writer

Many people consider FHC the best president Brazil ever had. I agree.

He is a respected intellectual, author of numerous publications, and this book shows that he is also an entertaining writer.

With the power of his intellect, he predicted in this 2006 book that: "The foundation for a richer, more prosperous country - and perhaps, one day, a world power - seems to be firmly in place". With our naked eyes at the present, we have reason to be less optimistic. Should his prophecy be fulfilled, it will not be without big bounces back and forth.

Robert W says

This breezy political autobiography is a nice introduction to recent Brazilian history, if you can stomach FHC's false humility. It forms a nice addition to *A Death in Brazil* by Peter Robb, which examines closely the corruption of the Collor presidency.

Cardoso gives a useful view of modern Brazil. The Prestes Column and the revolt of São Paulo in 1932 are given as examples of how tenuous the rule of the federal government of Brazil was. And the inability of Brazil to effect normal changes of government in the 50s and early 60s was given as a profoundly Brazilian weakness. This has been something I believed ever since the first Angolan elections after the end of the civil war there. It's not the first democratically elected president of a country that matters, but the second or third. It's when transition doesn't cause a crisis that democracy can be said to be sustainable. He also talks about how decisions made by Portugal in the 16th century (offering enormous land grants to settlers) have fed into the endemic inequality of today. This kind of commonsense observation helps one make sense of Brazilian history.

After the military finally gave up power in Brazil, they essentially handed power over to Tancredo Neves. Neves, however, died before he could take office. Neves was a fairly independent politician who was acceptable to the pro-democracy forces. The military had forced them to accept José Sarney as his running mate. Sarney was seen as the military's man. So in 1985, Sarney became the first non-military president of Brazil since the early 60s. The military had left Brazil in sorry shape, suffering from hyper-inflation and many other ills. Sarney failed to improve the situation—indeed, the inflation just got worse. Out of fear of Lula, the left-wing candidate, Brazil elected Collor in 1989. His pathetic story is told in gruesome detail in Robb's book. Not only did Collor not solve Brazil's inflation problem, he stole millions if not billions.

Meanwhile, Cardoso was slowly progressing politically. He is at pains to claim he had no political ambition, but he was clearly destined for politics from an early age—his father and grandfather were politically active—and when he was forced into exile by the military regime, he was instantly politicized. So even though he was a practicing sociologist, he was always involved in the struggles to reassert democracy—and that meant being in politics.

He was a senator when Collor's successor (and vice president) Itamar Franco hired him to be foreign minister. After three failed finance ministers, Franco brought in Cardoso. At this point, Cardoso accomplished one of the great economic/political feats in modern history—he introduced a new currency (a common occurrence in Brazil) and tamed inflation.

Now the most unbelievable part of the book is when he says he ran for president because he was afraid Lula would win. Lula was still too radical to win. Cardoso rightly thought Lula's ideas were backwards, especially as command economies were collapsing all around the world.

So Cardoso ran and won, twice, both times against Lula. He had already done his heroic thing. He says, "My presidency was, at its most basic level, about trying to turn Brazil into a stable country." That's what he accomplished during his presidency. His biggest crises were the worldwide debt crisis in the late 90s and AIDS, and he acquitted himself pretty well. And after he was term-limited out, an older, mellower Lula finally won (his fourth try). And Lula has been a more-or-less steady leader, fiscally reasonable, and a counterweight to the semi-radicals elected in Venezuela and elsewhere.

Cardoso is charming, and this book worth reading. Perhaps it's too much to ask for more detail, more economics, more nitty-gritty politics, more detail. But still I wish it had them.

May Ling says

Cardoso's book provides a straight forward account of the events leading to his presidency as well as a history of the socio-economic development he inherited during his presidency. It is unfortunate that more men of learning do not reach office.

I was particularly interested in his account of inflation as relates to the difficulty in implementing effective policy. While it seems obvious that inflation causes difficulty in paying back dollar denominated debt, I had not considered that it also motivates graft by making financial statements easy to manipulate and encouraging highly short dated duration mismatches. This will be one to watch as the world nations print their way out of the current economic troubles.

I am also discouraged for Brazil on the ability of Lula to successfully pass the types of policies necessary to navigate the nation through a period that could put them in a fantastically positive position. Brazil did - during the time - invest in infrastructure, education and diversification of industries. They are rich in resources. Should the rest of the world inflate, Brazil - provided it is able to maintain financial and political stability, should be in a good spot.

Finally, while very little of the book was about this topic, I would remark that I was saddened by the disparity between the accounts of his relationship with Clinton vs. Bush. It is a sad anecdotal of G. W. Bush's diplomacy acumen, e.g. to make such a poor impression to a nation that has - for the most part - been an ally to the US.

Luisa says

As a brazilian middle-class child born in 1988, most of Brazil's history i didn't know. All I knew was what i learned in history classes in school (which i never payed much attention) and what my parents told me. They lived at the bad times in Brazil, such as military regime, so everything i basicly knew was what i learned from them.

There was much I knew it happened, but didn't really understand why or how, or the issues the country had and why it got at that point, how it was a problem to the country, in which sense and how it harmed the people. Now i got the answers.

This book made me fall so in love with my country's history. And made me admire even more one of our most brilliant Presidents: Fernando Henrique Cardoso. With a brief history of ours previous presidents, since Dom Pedro II, Janio Quadros, João Goulart, Military regime and the most recent presidents - until his own government - I was delighted reading every chapter, hungry for more and more history, for the first time i was really enjoying a history leasson and feeling really proud for being Brazilian. I got emocional reading about his meeting with José Serra in Chile and how he almost was killed during the Pinochet coup and how the Lula's first wife died pregnant by an awful disease. I was so impressed by how he, FHC, saved the Brazilian's economy, now finally understanding the real issue and how people suffered with the inflation problem in early 90's. It became so clear, in this book, the reason of it and why it was such a huge problem and the brilliant plan he made to overcome it, everything in such a simple and easygoing way of wrting. And I believe this is his biggest legacy: a stable and strong economy, an organized and reliable country.

Now, after this reading i admire him even more, as a man, as a president, as a professor.

Kenneth says

This is a truly excellent book. Extremely informative and readable. Indeed much of it reads like a cliffhanger as we follow Cardoso into exile, through his opposition to the military regime, into the finance ministry during the hyperinflation, and into the presidency during the cascading Emerging market crises that led to the eventual devaluation of the Real he worked to hard to establish (though this did not lead to a default as it did in neighboring Argentina.) Additionally, the reader will come away with a general understanding of the history of Brazilian politics in the 20th and the 21st centuries with some understanding its roots in the 19th. It is a truly excellent work, I read it in five days.

Emi Kottasz says

A very good history lesson and insight into Brasilian politics. It made me understand the culture of corruption and racial division.

Celso says

This book was originally written in English and it has been recently translated into Portuguese. Every Brazilian citizen should read this book in order to better know the best president Brazil has ever had.

Micah says

Hard to be objective when you're a former politician painting the story of your legacy. But Cardoso did some pretty dope stuff. He was a sociologist by training and approached the presidency from a sociological point of view. Stabilized the currency. He was in favor of legalizing drugs. Interesting guy. Would love to hear the other side of this story too.

Gleyson Melo says

Particularmente não gosto de estudar história do Brasil, mas esse livro permite uma visão mais pessoal do FHC sobre os acontecimentos dos últimos 50 anos mais ou menos.

Não é lá um Thriller eletrizante, mas é bem interessante em alguns aspectos e é legal entender a dinâmica da política e como isso mudou de uns anos pra cá.

O ponto que mais me interessava no início era o tempo de ministro da economia e o desafio da inflação incontrolável.

Acho que o livro se paga bem nesse aspecto, explicando as principais ações de forma simples e explicando o contexto nacional da época.

Achei que valeu a pena e me motivou pra ler a biografia de outros presidentes como Lula, Dilma, Clinton e outros.

Tales Chaves says

Very interesting perspective on the history of politics in Brazil.

Max Lybbert says

Before reading this book, my knowledge of Cardoso was limited to (1) he had written Dependency and Development in Latin America, probably the most boring book I'd ever read (not really his fault, the book was written in academic Spanish, and the translator used cognates as much as possible, meaning that obscure Latin words show up instead of more common words); (2) he had become the Brazilian President largely because as Finance Minister he had brought Brazil's runaway inflation under control; and (3) after four years as President, Brazil amended its constitution specifically to allow Cardoso to run for re-election. Well, I also had a copy of Avança Brasil, his reelection platform.

I was surprised to learn from this book that Cardoso was a Marxist in his college days, that his college degrees are in sociology and social sciences (not economics), that he had been held by the military for a short time during one of Brazil's coups, that he became Finance Minister in spite of his best efforts to avoid the job, and that his plan to stop runaway inflation was based on what he and his team could glean from undergraduate economic textbooks in the time frame between his appointment and his confirmation.

The book is well-written, and the English used is much more readable than the English used in Dependency and Development in Latin America. The story is engaging. I was very happy with this book, and would recommend it to anyone wanting to learn about South American politics or South American economics.

Thomas Qais Osso-Faqiri says

This is a light read about a country and a topic of immense importance in our global village. Brazil is a place of colors, happy face, easygoing people, delicious foods, music and dance. But as happy and as full spirit the people, the nation's politics suffers from chronic corruption, inefficiencies and shortcomings. Cordoso speaks to the spirit of Brazil as well as to the hopes, dreams, disappointments and struggles of a nation that rightfully deserve a place among the major powers. It is a great read for someone who has no background information on Brazil. It is also a great read for those who know a thing or two about Latin America and Brazil in particular as a reminder that with good policies and courage, things can change. Brazil may not be where it should be, but Cordoso provides us with the necessary background narrative as to why. The format is almost conversational. He does not get entangled with deep analysis of his country's policies that failed and those that succeeded. As a narrator, he does a great job of walking us through the last 100 years of Brazilian history, politics and society. You can see him emerge in Brazil, first as an academic and then as a politician. It makes you read more about Brazil. It makes you fall in love with the country. It is a short book though. I would have liked to read a little more on some of the topics. I felt at times that he was going too fast and not pausing enough to help me understand or learn more about the issue he was addressing. I found him honest overall in both his successes and failures.

Frank Stein says

This is a wonderful history of Brazil as seen through the eyes of one sociology professor who happened to become President. Or, rather, the country is seen through the eyes of Fernando Cardoso's family, whose history has been so intertwined with their country they're hard to disentangle. His great-grandfather fell in and out of power during the reign of the reformist Portuguese Emperor Dom Pedro II, until he ended as the governor of a major western province. His grandfather was one of the three military officers to overthrow Dom Pedro in 1888 with hopes for a new rationalistic progressive order ("Order and Progress" began the new nation's motto). He then served as aide to several presidents, before supporting the young lieutenants, or tententes, who tried to overthrow the elitist order. His son, the author's father, helped carry through tententes revolt and install Getulio Vargas as president in 1930, before spending decades as a major military figure.

So Cardoso was surrounded by politics and presidents from a young age, and his eventual presidency seems much less "accidental" than he imagines. Yet he did choose the atypical path of becoming a professor. His studies of racial inequality in the 1950s electrified a nation that claimed it was a pure "racial democracy," without significant racial divides. His later blockbuster work on Latin American "Dependency and Development," put him on the center-left of the ongoing debate on economic growth, but distanced him from

many Marxists economists and professors dominating Latin American governments at the time.

The 1964 military coup against the erratic president Jango upset all his quiet plans. Cardoso went on the run, to Argentina, to Chile, to France, before returning just in time for an even more brutal crackdown. As a professor, however, he continued putting out books that subtly challenged the military's dominance, and then in 1977 won a Congress seat in Sao Paulo for the official opposition party. He helped orchestrate the end of the dictatorship in 1985, and then, most importantly, became Finance Minister in 1993, where his Plano Real finally ended the 1000 percent inflation that had bedeviled the country. This catapulted him to the presidency, running, as he would again, against his longtime friend and rival, the metalworkers union leader Lula de Silva, who would eventually succeed him. As President, he instituted those reforms that are now often dismissed as neoliberal. He controlled the budget deficit, kept inflation down, sold off state properties, and opened up trade. These reforms worked so well that even Lula came to embrace them.

Brazil has since retreated from the policies Cardoso enacted, and it is suffering the consequences. This book, however, helps one remember how hard won his victories were, and how fortunate the country was to have a sensible, pragmatic president for 8 years.

Karolinezs says

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso wrote a delightful book filled with history, politics and hints of sociology. All this in a light-hearted humor, charm and intelligence.

I am a huge FHC admirer; his life story and legacy are incomparable!

As a Brazilian, I am proud to say we had such a diplomatic, brilliant President who has a deep love for Brazil.

Menjol Almeida says

More than Accidental. It was tragical. A huge disaster.
