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COLUMN ONE

When Revolt Hit Rio

Leftists who abducted a U.S. ambassador in '69 now are part of Brazil's mainstream. They see their action as a key step toward democracy.

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RIO DE JANEIRO — Their job titles are what you'd expect of a group of successful, middle-aged professionals — congressman, pundit, professor, publicist. But 35 years ago, they shared a very different occupation: kidnapper.

It was September 1969, and they were radical young leftists out to rock Brazil's repressive military dictatorship. They succeeded with a stunning feat: They abducted the U.S. ambassador off the streets of Rio, held him hostage for four days and forced the Brazilian government to release 15 political prisoners.

The act shocked the world. It humiliated Brazil's U.S.-backed rulers and triggered a wave of copycat kidnappings. Most of the dozen or so conspirators landed in jail, where at least one was tortured to death.

Today, the participants have matured, mellowed and gone mainstream after returning to society from prison or exile. Brazil also has changed: Politics here has moved from rule by bullet to rule by ballot, and the nation is a democracy in progress.

The country's transformation was gradual, rather than the revolution the kidnappers had sought. But looking back, the former radicals have few regrets. Their actions, they say, helped set the stage for Brazil's metamorphosis.

"Thirty-five years is a short time, yet the situation today is totally different," marveled Manoel Cyrillo, one of the plotters who spent 10 years behind bars for other alleged crimes against the junta. He is now a public relations consultant and a grandfather.

"Democracy in Brazil advances day by day," he said. "It's a very beautiful process, very

distinctive and very Brazilian."

Cyrillo was just 23 but already a high-ranking urban guerrilla when he conspired in what many participants still call, almost wistfully, "the action" of 1969. Virtually all those involved in the abduction of U.S. Ambassador Charles Burke Elbrick were idealists in their 20s committed to smashing military rule in Brazil and, for some, ushering in a communist utopia.

Right-wing generals took power in Brazil in 1964 in a bloodless coup, ousting a left-leaning president. Recently declassified documents show that the United States, locked in the Cold War and worried that Brazil could become "the China of the 1960s," offered to help the junta.

By 1969, peaceful resistance to military rule had escalated into armed struggle in response to state measures that outlawed political parties, gagged the media and condoned the eventual imprisonment, torture, exile or assassination of thousands. Students spouting Marx and Mao joined with nationalists scornful of Brazil's alliance with the U.S.

At first, the rebels used their guns for bank heists and raids on state radio stations to spread their message of resistance. But some were eager to mount a high-impact operation, a showstopper to grab the world's attention, not just their compatriots'.

"One day we were walking along the street in Botafogo" — an upscale Rio neighborhood — "and Cid said, 'The American ambassador's car goes by here,' " recalled rebel Franklin Martins. Cid was fellow radical Cid Benjamin.

"And I suddenly hit on the idea," Martins said, "an obvious idea but one that nobody had thought of before."

By abducting the U.S. ambassador, the rebels could make an emphatic statement about what they saw as Brazil's subservience toward "North American capitalists," while using their captive as a bargaining chip to spring friends and comrades from prison, where they were being tortured.

Though they were often branded terrorists, the onetime guerrillas bristle at the label. To this day, they insist that the ambassador was a legitimate target as the official representative of a country that helped prop up the junta. Their actions, they say, differ from the current rash of kidnappings of foreign workers in Iraq or the recent school siege in Russia.

"We did not target civilians," said Vera Silvia Magalhaes, the only woman among the conspirators. "In none of the abductions [by Brazilian guerrillas] was the kidnapped person killed."

Martins, now a respected political commentator on national TV, agreed.

"In Brazil, we fought against an illegitimate government that overthrew the constitutional president, eliminated democratic freedoms and installed a dictatorship," he said. "We fought using peaceful as well as armed methods, the same way that American patriots rose up against English domination. We never attacked innocent people or used terror against the populace. We battled the military dictatorship."

The plan to nab Elbrick quickly gained steam. The rebels settled on the first week of September for the kidnapping to disrupt celebrations of Brazil's Independence Day, Sept. 7.

Elbrick was a tall, genteel Kentuckian, a career diplomat and, to the plotters' delight, a creature of habit, taking the same route between his residence and the embassy in a chauffeured black car with virtually no security around him.

Sept. 4, a Thursday brilliant with sunshine, the gang took up positions along the route. As a diplomatic vehicle beetled into view, they waited, tense, expectant.

Their lookout gave the signal. Then, just as urgently, he waved them back.

The car wasn't Elbrick's.

"We almost kidnapped the wrong person — the ambassador of Portugal," said Benjamin, 55, now a history professor in Rio.

When the right car finally appeared, the rebels cut it off, pulled out their guns and burst in, trapping Elbrick in the back seat and shoving aside his chauffeur. The only resistance came when Elbrick tried to wrest a revolver from one of his attackers. Cyrillo struck him on the forehead, dazing the envoy and drawing blood.

"We had no idea it would be such an easy operation," Benjamin said.

In the car, the militants left a manifesto blasting the dictatorship, labeling Elbrick a "symbol of exploitation" and threatening his execution in 48 hours if the government did not obey their orders, which included reading the text on radio and TV and releasing the 15 political prisoners.

The abduction sent telegraph wires humming. "U.S. Ambassador Kidnapped in Rio by Four Red Terrorists" was the front-page headline in this newspaper.

At their hide-out in the hilly district of Santa Teresa, the jubilant hostage-takers watched Brazil's iron-fisted rulers bow to their demands one by one. They developed a complex relationship with their victim, spending hours talking with Elbrick and discovering a thoughtful diplomat who seemed genuinely surprised to learn of the military regime's darker side.

"He was a democrat, and he was not in favor of the dictatorship," said Fernando Gabeira, now a congressman. "He was not aware of the torture that was going on underground. He was not lying in order to be a good boy. He was sincerely shocked."

Afterward, Elbrick, who died in 1983, would speak sympathetically of his captors as idealistic, if misguided, youths who washed his shirt and supplied him with cigars. He did not identify them to authorities, claiming that they wore hoods while speaking to him, which several of the kidnappers said was not true.

There is some dispute now among the former guerrillas as to whether they were prepared to kill the envoy if the government failed to comply with their demands.

Gabeira and Magalhaes say no.

Martins says yes.

"Whoever says otherwise is looking through rose-colored glasses and rewriting history," Martins said. "But we hoped it wouldn't come down to that."

Fortunately, it didn't. On Sept. 6, a plane bound for Mexico carried off all 15 requested prisoners, including Jose Dirceu, now the closest advisor to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The day after the prisoner release, Elbrick's kidnappers drove him to Rio's biggest soccer stadium and set him free in the exiting crowd before making their getaway. As Elbrick climbed into a taxi to go home, the cabbie reportedly said, "You're the American ambassador — poor man."

Deeply embarrassed, Brazil's rulers cracked down on the resistance, announcing new measures to banish all people considered "noxious and dangerous to national security."

Within months, security agents had hunted down most of the conspirators. Many endured beatings, electric shocks and other sadistic interrogation methods; at least one died in custody.

In an odd twist, Gabeira, Magalhaes and Benjamin were released and expelled to Algeria after militants kidnapped the German ambassador and put their names on a list for a similar prisoner swap.

For a decade, life for the former kidnappers became an exercise in clandestine survival in Brazil or an odyssey through other countries, including Cuba and Chile.

In 1979, the Brazilian government, under popular pressure to democratize, decreed an amnesty for most of those accused of political crimes and those who took part in the dictatorship. Elbrick's captors trickled back into society, older, wiser, ready to raise families, find jobs and support the nation's slow but peaceful liberalization.

Gabeira, Martins and Benjamin became members of Brazil's press, newly unmuzzled after years of censorship. Martins worked at a variety of small newspapers before moving on to major dailies such as *Jornal do Brasil* and *O Globo*, where he sharpened his skills as a political columnist. He is now a Brasilia-based pundit for the *Globo* television network.

Cyrillo went into marketing and established his own public-relations agency. He now works with Brazil's state-owned oil company, *Petrobras*, where his boss is one of the 15 political prisoners whose release he helped secure in 1969.

Although life is pleasant now, reminders of his 10 years in prison — some of that time under torture — remain.

"I'm frightened of electricity to this day," said Cyrillo, 58. "It's a good thing my wife is a physicist. She changes the light bulbs, fixes the shower."

Brazil's political transformation came full circle two years ago when Lula, a onetime union organizer and target of the dictatorship, was elected president. Men and women once jailed for battling the government now are part of it, embodying the remarkable rehabilitation of the left over the last quarter of a century.

The former kidnapers still dream of a socially just, egalitarian society — which Brazil, with its vast disparities between rich and poor, still is not.

But none sees a need now for violence to achieve their goals. Their fanaticism is a thing of the past, tempered by time and experience.

"I don't have so many certainties now," said Magalhaes, 56, an administrator with a think-tank in Rio. "At the time, I read Marx and Mao and agreed with everything. I knew the path of revolution. Now I don't know the path."

"It's better to be an arsonist in your 20s and then a fireman in your 40s," added Cyrillo.

Only Gabeira, 63, said he regrets the kidnapping, although it helped make him famous. His account of it, "*O Que E Isso, Companheiro?*" ("What's This, Comrade?") became a bestseller and the basis for the 1997 movie "*Four Days in September*" by director Bruno Barreto, which received an Oscar nomination for best foreign film.

Gabeira built on his reputation as an a journalist and author of books on liberal causes to run for governor of Rio de Janeiro state in 1986. Although his first bid for public office failed, in 1994 he succeeded in being elected to Brazil's Congress.

A maverick politician who champions the environment, gay rights and the legalization of marijuana, Gabeira said of the abduction: "It's something that I do not accept anymore. I do not accept any political act of violence, except in the case of a country being invaded by enemies. If it were the same circumstances again, I would try to resist peacefully, like

[Martin] Luther King [Jr.] or Gandhi."

But he believes the Elbrick incident helped set Brazil on the path to reform because the repression that followed discredited the military regime internationally.

"Isolated, the kidnapping was a mistake," because it sparked such ferocious retaliation, said Martins, 56. But, he added, "it was part of the more general process that eventually resulted in the establishment of democracy. Of that I have no doubt."

The liberties that Brazilians enjoy today were hard-won, including the freedom Martins has to debate what he and the others did in September 1969.

Few Brazilians consider these former rebels as criminals, although a website dedicated to defending the military dictatorship lambastes Elbrick's kidnapers as terrorists.

"I'm not ashamed of [the kidnapping], unlike the people who participated in the torture and the killing. They can't talk about what they did and take pride in telling their grandkids about it," Martins said. "I live at peace with myself."

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