



The sphinx of Itajubá: political challenges in the presidency of Wenceslau Brás (1914)

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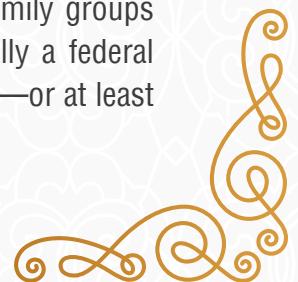


Fon-Fon magazine of 2.12.1910, page 11. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The news of the time reports that the election of Hermes da Fonseca in 1910 took place amid great political turmoil—much like his presidential term, which lasted until 1914. The difficulty of maintaining public order would be the defining characteristic of this administration, in which Wenceslau Brás served as vice-president and, by virtue of this role, as president of the Federal Senate.

The slate composed of these two leaders elected to govern the nation was perceived as a supposed dissidence among the previously hegemonic oligarchic groups. It merely illustrates, nonetheless, one of many realignments within the so-called *café com leite* politics, which, until 1930, ensured the alternation of power between members of the Minas Gerais Republican Party (PRM) and the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP). The campaign also marked the return of the military to the political stage, embodied in the figure of the president-elect himself, who would shift the political and geographic power axis toward the far south.

Hermes da Fonseca sought to reform traditions through the implementation of the so-called anti-oligarchic militarism, which aimed at sweeping the ruling oligarchies off the map. To some extent, this did happen, but mainly through the *Salvationist movement* (1910-1914), which primarily targeted family groups in the Northeast. Although the dismantling of oligarchies was initially a federal government project, it was popular participation that ultimately drove—or at least attempted to bring about—the end of the classical oligarchic republic.





This text published in *O Malho* magazine of 11.19.1910 presented the manifesto of the Hermes da Fonseca – Wenceslau Brás slate. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Although this was a turbulent period, the tenure of Wenceslau Brás as vice-president was portrayed by the press in Rio de Janeiro as the most unremarkable in the history of the Republic. He was a frequent target of satirical cartoons that emphasized his provincial spirit and the circumspect nature of the *Solitary Man of Itajubá*, as he was known. His manners and temperament remained a longstanding matter of discussion among those eager for the dynamism and cosmopolitanism promised by the advent of the Republic, especially in Rio de Janeiro, the cultural capital of Brazil in the *belle époque*.



Photograph published in *Fon-Fon* magazine of 12.20.1913 showing the candidates for president and vice-president of the Republic. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Malho magazine of 2.26.1916, year 15, No. 702, cover. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The 1914 presidential election that led Wenceslau Brás to the Presidency of the Republic was the result of prior arrangements and negotiations that were far from peaceful—an inherent feature of the representative system of the First Republic. They had also been the key feature of his predecessor’s turbulent administration. Selecting the vice-president as the candidate for that election was the solution found for a highly contested succession process, which initially began with the veto of General Pinheiro Machado’s candidacy. A political leader from Rio Grande do Sul and the chief strategist of Hermes da Fonseca’s government, Pinheiro Machado had formed a ticket with fellow senator Bueno Brandão, a political leader from Minas Gerais, backed by the Conservative Republican Party. However, Minas Gerais’ refusal to support Pinheiro Machado, along with São Paulo’s opposition, was followed by Pernambuco, Bahia, Pará, Alagoas and Paraná. His candidacy caused divisions among the still-dominant state oligarchies. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, although Nilo Peçanha officially endorsed him, the state’s president, Oliveira Botelho, opposed the Pinheiro/Bueno ticket. Feeling rejected, Pinheiro Machado proposed Rui Barbosa as an alternative, who promptly declined the offer. Lacking the necessary political support, the Pinheiro/Bueno ticket was definitively withdrawn by mid-1913. The alternative was to put forward the candidacy of former president Campos Salles. Although backed by Rio Grande do Sul, his nomination was opposed by several other states (Bahia, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro) and created divisions within Minas Gerais. Meanwhile, the opposition regrouped around Rui Barbosa. With the increasing risk of another highly contested election, Wenceslau Brás emerged as a compromise solution. The final approval came with the addition of Urbano dos Santos, a member of the Conservative Republican Party as vice-presidential candidate.

Thus, on March 1st, 1914, Wenceslau Brás was elected president of Brazil for the 1914-1918 term, a period that proved to be even more turbulent than the previous one. Firstly, due to the continuation of the armed conflicts in the disputed border region between the southern states of Paraná and Santa Catarina. The *Contestado War*, which had erupted in 1912, was driven by a popular uprising led by former inhabitants of the area, many of whom were squatters on returned lands that had been granted to the Brazil Railway Company for the construction of a railroad linking



the states of Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. The movement took on a messianic characteristic under the leadership of João Maria, a healer who used herbal remedies, and successfully clashed with the first Army detachment sent to suppress the revolt. The conflict was only quelled in 1916, when Wenceslau Brás signed the agreement that brought an end to the longest-running state border dispute in Brazil.



Image: collection of the Biblioteca da Presidência da República.

Wenceslau Brás Pereira Gomes

Wenceslau Brás Pereira Gomes (1868- 1966), a native of Minas Gerais, graduated from the Law Faculty of São Paulo, where he also earned a degree in Legal and Social Sciences in 1890. He served as public prosecutor in the district of Monte Santo and, later, judge in Jacuhy. In 1892, he was elected state deputy and re-elected in 1894. After holding various state positions in Minas Gerais, he was elected federal deputy in 1903 and again in 1906. From 1908 to 1910, he headed the government of Minas Gerais; in 1910, he was elected vice-president on the slate of Marshal Hermes da Fonseca. In 1914, he was elected president of Brazil. After his term in office ended in 1918, he remained active in politics until 1947. Wenceslau Brás passed away in Itajubá, Minas Gerais, on May 15th, 1966.

It was also during the presidency of Wenceslau Brás that Brazil declared war on Germany, albeit only three years after war had begun in Europe, and without Brazil ever engaging in combat. The argument was that the nation's forces should be preserved for a possible German attack on Brazilian soil. However, the real reason was the country's complete lack of military preparedness and its limited and outdated arsenal.



Front page of the *Correio da Manhã* newspaper of 6.2.1917, announcing the president's approval of the law that declared war on the countries of the Triple Alliance. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Fundou-se hontem a Liga Pró Saneamento do Brasil

Conforme estava anunciado, realizou-se, hontem à tarde, na Sociedade Nacional de Agricultura, a sessão de instalação da Liga Pró Saneamento, uma nova associação, que como o seu nome indica, virá prestar grandes serviços à nossa sociedade.

Aberta a sessão, o sr. Belisario Penna, submeteu à aprovação da assembléa a escolha do nome que deveria presidir a, sendo escolhido então o de dr. Carlos Chagas.

Tendo porém o dr. Carlos Chagas se ausentado momentaneamente antes, presidiu a sessão o dr. Julião Moreira, vice-presidente aclamado.

Foram lidos então varios telegrammas de exousa.

Em seguida usou da palavra o dr. Belisario Penna, que fez um longo estudo da vida do dr. Oswaldo Cruz, concluindo pela apresentação das idéas que presidiram a fundação da Liga: são idéas de propaganda a favor do saneamento do Brasil, propaganda oral, escripta e gratuita. Originou-se da publicação de um livro onde se compendiam os artigos feitos pelo orador quando foi do alarme vibrado pelo dr. Miguel Pereira, daquelle phrase do "Brasil, limpa-se o hospital". Os editores não queriam imprimir o livro. Dois mecos, porém, céticos de preocupações pelo estado sanitario da pátria — conta o orador — se offerteram a esaudar imprimir o livro, tirando parte dos lucros para a fundação de uma liga nas condições da que se installava. Era este o germe de tudo. As ultimas phrases da oração foram de invocação à memoria de Oswaldo Cruz, invocação comovimento de disciplina, que sente a obra do mestre impercedora e disposto a tudo sacrificar, como os seus discipulos, pelo desenvolvimento da sessão do grande salão, pela realização do sonho de um Brasil livre dos males que depauperam e annihilam tantos de seus filhos, do sonho que foi o grande sonho d'elle durante toda a sua vida de glórias. Diante se e foi muito applaudido, tendo depois a palavra o sr. Paulo Cavalcanti, que secretariava a mesa, ao lado do sr. Julião Moreira. O sr. Paulo Cavalcanti fez um discurso entusiastico, prezando o alevantamento da raça e comparando a luta pelo saneamento do Brasil à campanha da abolição de 18, por isso que a, defendeu com fervor a abolição dos papulos e dos sítios, mostrando-se confiante na acção da mocidade e no auxilio das grandes e das humildes, e dizendo que precisamos ser uma raça sã e linda, que só se ama o que é bello e que é preciso promover a redempção da mulher pela hygiene. O orador se terminou por muita applausão.

Não houve mais ordens, o sr. Julião Moreira, suspendeu a sessão, devendo ser convocada uma nova assembléa para a aprovação de estatutos.

The post-war period led to the rise of nationalist movements in Brazil, as in other parts of the world. This movement manifested in Brazil through two key initiatives: compulsory military service and a nationwide campaign aimed at improving rural sanitation. The underlying idea was that nation-building depended fundamentally on public health, particularly through addressing the health needs of the neglected populations in Brazil's remote hinterlands.

The Pro-Sanitation League mobilized key sectors of Brazil's intellectual and political elites in an effort to extend sanitation initiatives to the country's interior as a means of modernization and development. Some of its members actively participated in a scientific expedition that explored some of the country's most remote regions, which culminated in the publication of the seminal work *Scientific Journey through Northern Bahia, Southwestern Pernambuco, Southern Pará, and Goiás from North to South*, organized by the Instituto Oswaldo Cruz and published in 1912. The medical mission's report provided valuable insights into climate, fauna and flora, but primarily focused on the diseases afflicting the inhabitants of Brazil's hinterlands, who had been largely neglected by national integration projects. Interestingly, although the report advocated for concrete measures to promote national integration—such as the establishment of a Ministry of Public Health, to foster a sense of belonging and national identity among these marginalized populations—its publication in the Rio de Janeiro press coincided with the outbreak of the Spanish flu epidemic that ravaged the federal capital at the end of

1918. Notably, members of the medical mission were themselves affected by the same influenza strain. This epidemic also struck the only Brazilian naval division deployed to Europe during World War I.

The Spanish flu was perhaps the most remarkable legacy from Wenceslau Brás to his successor, when he concluded his mandate on November 15th, 1918.

The four-year term of this reserved and introverted president was not distinguished by any strong features, and, as a result, he became the subject of frequent satirical references in the press, including cartoons, caricatures and chronicles, which emphasized the insular and reclusive nature of the *sphinx of Itajubá*.

These portrayals reflect the prevailing spirit of that time which placed, on one side, the enlightened elite composed of intellectuals, journalists and writers, who almost obsessively championed national progress and cosmopolitanism; and, on the other hand, the archaic conservatism embodied by the president's taciturn demeanor and narrow perspectives—qualities emblematic of Minas Gerais—and the similar traits of his associates, all of which became the target of satire:

No citizen ever saw him with a cigarette in his mouth; V. (an allusion to Wenceslau Brás) did not play games at celebratory inaugurations, his glass of champagne was always full; at joyful outdoor events on football match days, or during the grand-prix, V. never broke the serious frown between his eyebrows. He was what is called, in Minas Gerais, a sour-face [...]. V. was not a head of State: he was a severe ascetic who fasted, said the rosary before bed, went to mass and fulfilled duties. [...] He lacked it all: decisiveness, broad vision, factual knowledge, self-confidence and even that joie de vivre which is a gift of the gods [...] V. lived in the Catete Palace as a hermit, nostalgic for his modest existence, his fishing—I don't know!—always hesitating, always consulting his old Minas backwoodsmen, suspicious that they were leading him astray, fearing contact with superior and more sparkling spirits. (Revista Contemporânea magazine, Rio de Janeiro, November 21, 1918).

News item published by the *O Imparcial* newspaper of 2.12.1918, page 3, announcing the creation of the Pro-Sanitation League. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Despite the difficulties of the period, Wenceslau Brás finished his mandate having dealt with them in a shy and timid manner. For many journalists and writers of the age, his presidency was not distinguished by any notable traits. His failures, intellectual mediocrity and lack of literary culture were highlighted in the chronicles of the time, so that, although he could not be remembered for the competence of his administration, his reclusive nature was immortalized in the cartoons and caricatures of the main Rio de Janeiro newspapers of the period.



O Malho magazine of 8.9.1913, Rio de Janeiro, year 12, No. 569, page 25. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



A Careta magazine of 11.16.1918, page 11. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



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