Brazil is the fifth largest country on earth. It is nearly half of
the land mass of South America and all of Europe could easily be fitted
into its boundaries. Among the things the astronauts in space could
clearly see were the smoke from the fires burning off trees and brush in
the Brazilian jungle and the dark waters of the Amazon River pouring into
the Atlantic.

This current of silt and plant material in the Atlantic was noticed by
an expedition to India led by the Portuguese captain, Pedro Álvarez
Cabral. He was a little off course, perhaps because of unfavorable winds
and currents, or maybe, because of the less than perfect sixteenth century
navigational equipment. (Seamen could figure out latitude quite
accurately but the calculation of longitude remained uncertain until the
invention of good chronometers). Cabral spent a week reconnoitering the
coast of the new land he discovered at 17 degrees south and decided he had
discovered an island which he named Ilha de Vera Cruz. This coast was to
the east of the line drawn by the Treaty of Tordesillas which divided
newly discovered lands between Spain and Portugal and, therefore, was
considered Portuguese territory. Today Brazil is the only Portuguese
speaking country in Latin America.

In this new land was found a tree eagerly sought because its wood
produced a red dye. The name of this tree, Brazil, was gradually extended
to the entire country. To protect this valuable trade from the French and
other interlopers, the Portuguese sent a fleet and finally settlers who
established a colony in 1532 near present day Santos.

The land distribution in this first colony established the pattern of
land distribution for centuries throughout the country. The coast was
divided into giant plantations of 20 to 50 square miles and the grants of
land inland were 10 to 50 times greater. The captain of the grant was a
virtual feudal lord expected to colonize and develop the land at his own
expense but with the power to tax and execute justice.

To be Portuguese was to be Catholic and the king desiring to propogate
the faith sent six Jesuits to Brazil in 1549. They and their successors
left a lasting imprint on the land carrying the European church-centered
civilization to the Indians and establishing and maintaining the best
educational facilities in the country.

Brazilian history appears to be a sequence of cycles when a single
product determined the well-being of most of the country -- a new product,
a boom, a decline and a bust -- then another product, another boom,
another bust, for luckily just when one product declined another arose.
So it went from dyewood, to sugar, to tobacco, to cattle, to mining, to
coffee, to rubber, to oil.

As the importance of the dyewood trade lessened, the growth of sugar
cultivation and trade increased. Sugar required increasingly large
investments in money, land, workers, machinery, and storehouses and helped
perpetuate the old economic pattern of large properties owned by very rich
families. With the growth of large sugar plantations came the problem of
labor. The Indians who had been virtual slaves on the early plantations
could not supply enough manpower as production increased so blacks were
imported from Africa from the mid fifteen hundreds to the mid nineteenth
century. The growth of a new crop, tobacco, also demanded many workers.
Just when the sugar trade went into a tailspin because of competition from more efficient Caribbean plantations, gold was discovered in Minas Gerais. People from the coast and new immigrants rushed into the interior to search for gold and then diamonds. It was impossible to raise enough food on the coast and ship it inland to feed all these mouths, and the beef cattle industry grew to take care of this problem. Oxen could be used to haul goods and beef also fed the people. In addition to expanding and settling vast stretches of the interior which were not suitable for sugar or tobacco, these gauchos contributed to colonial unification by opening new communication routes when they drove their herds to markets on the coast.

In 1727 coffee was introduced into Brazil and grew to be an important crop until today Brazil is the largest coffee producer in the world. The coffee fazendas were worked in much the same manner as the sugar and tobacco plantations but since most of the coffee industry began after the cessation of the slave trade, it depended less on slavery and more on low salaried immigrant workmen.

Brazil became the most important colony of Portugal. When Napoleon's armies invaded Portugal, a British fleet, (naturally in return for generous commercial privileges) transported the Portuguese royal family to Brazil. After the defeat of Napoleon, the king returned to Portugal and left his son, Pedro, as regent in Brazil and in 1815 Brazil was raised to the status of a kingdom.

To the alarm of the Brazilians, governmental reforms tightened Portuguese control and greater bureaucratic authority and efficiency seemed to threaten their economic interests. The Brazilian cities by stages gained control of Pedro's government and he decided to break with control from Lisbon and proclaimed Brazil independent in 1822 with himself as Emperor Pedro I. He clashed with the new constitutional assembly and surrounded himself with Portuguese advisers. The new constitution provided for a highly centralized government with four branches, executive, legislative, judiciary and moderating, but the lion's share of power remained with the emperor.

Under Pedro I the financial situation became desperate, the foreign debt rose and the issuance of paper money by the Bank of Brazil drove out silver and gold and forced the government to liquidate the bank. Much of the financial woes arose from an expensivea war with Argentina over the east bank of the Plata River. (This dispute ended in a compromise with the establishment of Uruguay which with Paraguay served as buffer states between Argentina and Brazil.) The people also resented the Emperor's increasing involvement with the struggle for the crown back in Portugal. Finally in a dispute with the legislature over cabinet appointments, Pedro decided to abdicate and sailed for Europe in 1831.

Under the constitution a regency, first of three and later reduced to one, elected by the Assembly was to rule until the heir became 18. They ruled so ineptly there were conflicts between the assembly and the provinces for control of the government and outbreaks of violence in some areas. A group of liberals sent a mission to Pedro II in 1840 asking him to take control even though he had not yet reached his majority. This coup d'état calmed the turbulent political waters and was the beginning of a long stable reign.
Pedro II decided to name a prime minister who would in turn select his own subordinates and during his 47 year reign developed skill balancing the liberal and conservative parties. The economy improved as coffee took the place of sugar as the major export. Slavery gave way to European immigration with the suppression of the slave trade in 1850 and money tied up in the slave trade was released for other investment. Some Europeans were discouraged from migrating because almost all of the prime land had long been claimed by old, wealthy families. More favorable trade agreements were arranged with England and Portugal, the main trading partners, and the increased tariffs accounted for approximately half of the national revenue. The first steamboats appeared on the Amazon and in 1867 it was opened to ships of all nations. An era of railway building began. The Civil War in the United States reduced the world cotton supply and Brazil increased cotton production to meet the new demands. Rubber was collected in increasing amounts from the wild trees in the Amazon valley although the rubber boom did not come until the days of the Old Republic.

It was also the time of the beginnings of industrialization with factories increasing 100 fold in 30 years. The textile industry was the most important. The urban, professional class increased. Cities grew and Rio de Janiero became a metropolis with its principal streets paved and lined with elegant buildings and an efficient sewage system. Even so the wealth of the country, commerce and banking were concentrated in the southeast region (Rio, Sao Paulo), with the rest of Brazil being overwhelmingly rural. A large, well-organized, and professional military emerged from the wars with Argentina and Paraguay with its officers drawn from the newly formed urban middle class.

The slaves were freed gradually through a series of laws first freeing children and finally in 1888 the Golden Law freed all slaves without any compensation to slaveowners. In 1822 there were 4 million inhabitants with one half African slaves. In 1888 there were 14 million inhabitants with about 600,000 slaves and 300,000 wealthy landowners.

By 1888 the gulf between the near feudal countryside and the more progressive urban areas and coffee plantations had widened and most people felt that the Emperor represented the rich planters, not the middle class and emerging capitalists. The military began to take part in politics and its mounting dissatisfaction led to the overthrow of the Empire.

The republic was created without bloodshed or even imprisonments (unheard of in most of South America). The Emperor abdicated and sailed for Europe. A new constitution strongly based on that of the United States decreed the separation of church and state, a presidential form of government with a national legislature of two houses. The states however retained a great deal of power including an export tax and the illiterate were disenfranchised. Gradually the coffee planters gained control of the county and the middle class took a secondary role.

Brazil entered a prosperous era based on coffee, cattle and rubber. Rubber was gathered from wild trees in the Amazon basin. No effort was made to cultivate the trees which took 20 years to mature and by 1910 Brazilian rubber was losing out on the world market to the more
efficiently produced rubber from cultivated trees in Malaya and Ceylon. But while the rubber from the wild Brazilian trees commanded peak prices all Brazil benefited and the Amazon basin saw magnificence and luxury not seen since equalled. The cost of living in the jungle cities was high, but the incomes were high too and the money was spent on magnificent buildings such as the marble and gold leaf opera house in Manaus where highly paid European opera singers enchanted the population.

During this period of the Old Republic the foreign minister Rio-Branco wanted to strengthen Brazilian leadership in South America. He began by securing for Brazil the first cardinal in South America. He succeeded during the early years of his ministry in shifting Brazil's diplomatic axis from London to Washington and placed anew emphasis on Pan-Americanism. An important achievement was the amicable settlement of the frontier problems to end a potential sources of friction with Brazil's neighbors of French and British Guiana, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. Brazil managed to round out her territory to gain almost the entire Amazon drainage system. Another foresighted statesman was Niilo Pecanha who created the Indian Protection Service, a sorely needed institution to help the diminishing Indian population;

A growing climate of militarism climaxed with the election of a soldier as president and also led to a series of naval revolts. In spite of the admiration of the government for the German military establishment, Brazil sided with the Allies during World War I and joined the League of Nations.

In post World War I Brazil industrialization expanded and poor workers flocked to the cities building shanty towns near the elegant boulevards where the rich people lived. Sao Paulo challenged Rio as the foremost industrial state. Labor unions rose and attained enough power to strike and close down whole cities. With increased immigration people began to see Brazil as a giant racial melting pot, but even today socially and economically the blacks are at the bottom of the pyramid, the whites at the top, and the in betweens in color in between. There is not a black activist group as in the United States. Resentment in Brazil is primarily economic not racial. In the 1920's a privileged, land owning class continued to rule and politicians wheeled and dealed.

Getulio Vargas seized power in 1930, serving first as the chief of a provisional government, from 1934 to 1937 as a constitutional president elected by congress, from 1937 to 1945 as dictator and returning in 1951-1954 as a constitutional president elected by the people. Under Vargas working women were finally allowed to vote, the secret ballot was assured and a merit system was introduced into the civil service. Industrialization accelerated (especially the steel industry) permitting the rising middle class to check the traditional domination of the planters and the search for oil was initiated with the establishment of the National Petroleum Council. Economic nationalism intensified with plans to expand the railroad and steamship networks and create hydroelectric power.

Brazil sided with the Allies during World War II and sent an expeditionary force to Europe. During the was Brazil exported manufactured goods at an increasing rate. Still industrialization affected only the southeastern part of the nation - Sao Paulo, Rio, Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Sui. Brazil remained an agricultural nation.
The Brazilians questioned why they should fight to restore democracy in Europe and suffer a dictatorship at home. Vargas was pressed to hold elections for president, governors and state and national assembly members. When there were indications that he intended to interfere with the elections he was deposed by a group of army officers.

In the last years of the war three important political parties and many smaller parties took shape. The new constitution of 1946 was carefully written and seemed to be capable of promoting democratic government. A measure of the successful democratization was that all of the elections held under this constitution were generally honest. A major fault was the denial of the vote to illiterates who were about 60% of the population. Since most of the literates lived in the coastal cities especially in the southeast, the elections were heavily weighted in favor of these areas.

The essentially conservative post-war governments were strongly anti-communist and suspicious of any proposed economic, social or political reforms. In the 1950 election who should turn up again elected president by the people but Getulio Vargas. Now 68 he was less flexible and less adept at managing the diverse factions and in 1954 was forced from office by the military and committed suicide. The military stepped in to guarantee the constitutional process and the vice-president, Café Filho, succeeded to the presidency.

The 1956 election brought in the ebullient Juscelino Kubitschek who is best remembered for the audacious plan to build a new capital city inland away from the influence of the rich coastal cities of Rio and Sao Paulo. Brasilia, in the new capital district carved from the state of Goias, was designed by Lucio Costa in the form of an airplane. (The fuselage is the governmental center and the wings are the commercial and residential areas.) The striking buildings designed by Óscar Niemeyer matched this imaginative plan. New highways to connect it to the rest of the country were built, the city rose on the red, dusty plain and was ready for the government to move in after only three years. This was all very expensive and the government printing presses were turned on and the currency flowed. The result was ruinous inflation. Attempts by Kubitschek’s successor, Janio Quadros, to slow inflation coupled with his friendly overtures to third world countries brought about his downfall and he resigned.

The vice-president who succeeded him, Joao Goulart, appointed many leftist ministers and was opposed by the military. His government undertook vast, expensive hydroelectric projects. The assembly enacted laws limiting the profits foreign companies could withdraw from the country. Goulart’s plans included granting the vote to illiterates, tax reform, and land expropriation to encourage agrarian reform. Finally the military felt he had gone too far and he was deposed in 1964 and fled to Uruguay. The CIA let the generals know that they could expect prompt U. S. approval if Goulart was ousted. The United States government considered Goulart far too radical, unfriendly to foreign business and a potential danger to hemispheric security. Since 1964 the generals controlled the selection of presidents. The government actually managed to slow down inflation until it was stabbed in the back by the oil crisis of the 1970’s. Prices soared and workers struck.
The 1989 civilian incumbent, Jose Sarney, came to power as a result of a vote in an electoral college and supported the fourth writing of the constitution. The November 1989 election will be the first chance the people have had to elect a president since 1960.

The more than 20 candidates for president include a labor leader, Leonel Brizola, 68; a Marxist, Luis da Silva, 43; and former President Quadros, now 72. But the leader in the polls is a relative newcomer, Fernando Collor de Mello, a former governor of Brazil's second smallest state, the arid northeastern state of Alagoas. His critics call the 39 year old, 6 foot one, Collor the creation of the media. He is the only candidate to come of an established family with a sugar baron grandfather, a father who was a former governor and senator, and a wife who is an heiress from Rio. His family owns a newspaper, a television station and radio stations. As governor he won favor in a state where two-thirds of the people live below the poverty line by attacking the "Maharajas", an elite cast of state employees with high salaries. (An state legislator earns $10,000 more than a United States senator.) He dismissed many from cushy jobs and held up the salaries of others. His platform is basically "throw the rascals out" citing incumbent President Jose Sarney's plane trip to the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution with 150 of his closest friends aboard, making his delegation twice the size of Japan's. An example of his media savvy is that on a trip to Europe he had a 20 minute audience with the Pope while his nearest rival "Luiz" da Silva had only a brief greeting.

Whoever wins in November faces monumental tasks. In a July poll, Brazilians listed their problems as 1) unemployment, 2) inflation, 3) health, 4) education, 5) government corruption, and tied for 6) foreign debt and crime.

Brazil, with its $124 billion foreign debt, has $2.3 billion in foreign loan payments due this fall. Indeed, from 1980-1987, Brazil paid out $50.4 billion more in debt payments than it received in new loans. In July Brazil missed $812 million in debt payments, but officials said it was only a precautionary move and the temporary delays were caused by Brazil's need to preserve reserves, believed to be about $53.5 billion, to cover four months of imports. The United States is Brazil's largest trading partner and largest creditor. Brazilian officials said they were told that Brazil was ineligible for a debt relief program made public by U.S. Treasury Secretary Brady because Brazil has not shown willingness to undertake austerity measures.

Mr. Collor has suggested that public and private debtors would individually renegotiate their debts with foreign creditors. Mr. Brizola advocates auditing the entire debt and limiting payments to fifteen per cent of export earnings. Mr. da Silva proposes stopping debt payments and using the money for agrarian reforms.

Inflation is galloping at around one thousand per cent annually. In June, when inflation rose twenty-five percent, the government conceded defeat and reinstated indexing of the economy and daily currency devaluations. In the 1980's the per cent annual growth in per capita income averaged one per cent.
Two-thirds of Brazilian families live below the poverty line which is defined by the government as about $75 a month. The Indians have particularly suffered throughout Brazilian history, first enslaved and then pushed into the outback and exploited by all comers. There is a very real possibility that they will become extinct. Despite improvements over the past 20 years, Brazil has one of the highest infant-mortality rates in Latin America. There are fee clinics in almost every town and more hospitals are being built, but it is difficult to persuade doctors and nurses to move from the cities. A national literacy campaign is under way and secondary and university education has been restructured to stress practical arts and sciences -- more computer programmers and fewer poets.

Environmental problems loom large in Brazil particularly because their solution or lack of solution affects the entire world. The Amazon basin which for millions of years flourished and served as a gigantic lung for the world and a storehouse of more plants than are known of anywhere else on earth is endangered by encroachment from Brazil's rapidly growing population, particularly by the slashing and burning of trees to enable farmers to plant crops or graze cattle. Roads have been cut into the jungle to give access to isolated areas, but farming has not produced the levels of economic success originally expected. The jungle soils are fragile and after short periods of use farmers are forced to move on to find new lands to cultivate. The pictures in the Geographic show the changes made in Rondonia on the Bolivian border in just fifteen years. In the photographs taken by satellite you can clearly see the new roads and farms. Porto Velho's population has doubled to 320,000 in just four years. Gold prospectors also add to the problem by using mercury to amalgamate gold and thus introducing mercury into the streams and the food chain.

A study reported in 1987 in Nature showed that revenues generated by harvesting edible fruits, rubber, oils, and cocoa on a 2.5 acres test site in the tropical forest are twice the return on timber or the value of the land if used for grazing cattle. Chico Mendes Filho, the leader of the rubber tappers' union who worked to thwart landowners' efforts to burn vast expanses of rain forest for cattle pasture, was killed by a shotgun blast from ambush in December. He has become a symbol of the fight to save the forest and books, movies, and television programs about him are planned.

To date Brazil has not had the tremendous drug problems of Colombia and Bolivia, but crime bosses from Colombia are thought to have fled into Brazil and Brazil is notorious for its reluctance to extradite criminals to other countries. We can only wait and see what happens there and also what is the outcome of the November election.

Arie Wittke Oct 1989