As a benchmark of development Brazilians like to compare their country with the United States. Their reasoning is pretty convincing and goes something like this: Brazil and the US are roughly the same size (Brazilians will remind you that Brazil is in fact larger than the Continental USA), both are vibrant democracies, both achieved independence from European colonizers at around the same time, both are abundant in natural resources and have huge labor forces.

Brazilians used to wonder why their country is not more like its North American counterpart. Not anymore. There is a real sense here that Brazil is finally fulfilling its potential and is indeed becoming another USA. The United States circa 1964.

That was the year that President Lyndon Baines Johnson first presented his idea of the Great Society at Ohio University. This became a series of social programmes intended to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States. Some of the changes then implemented such as Medicare and federal education funding still exist today.

The most ambitious and far-reaching part of the Great Society was its War on Poverty, which made major amendments to social security, significantly increasing benefits and expanding coverage. By 1970 the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line had fallen from just over 22% to 12%. Between 1961 and 1968 the American economy grew at an average rate of 4.5% per year.

Today, Brazil is experiencing very similar changes.

Through its version of the Great Society, which includes the flagship programmes such as Bolsa Família and Brasil - Sem Miséria (Brazil - Without Misery) Brazil is witnessing developments remarkably similar to those implemented in the States 50 years ago. They are having the same effect. The number of Brazilians living below the poverty line fell from 28% in 2003 to 22% in 2010.

While the Great Society sought to fight poverty and enfranchise Afro-Americans in the United States, in Brazil disenfranchisement is mostly regional not racial. That is why Brazil's War on Poverty has had the most pronounced effect on its very own version of the Deep South - the Nordeste (the region made up of the states of Pernambuco, Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão and Rio Grande do Norte).

Brazilians who used to be disenfranchised have finally become consumers for the first time and millions are clambering out of abject poverty with the support of the Federal Government and a booming economy.

Of course, there is much more still to do; improvements need to be made to infrastructure and education, in addition to political and tax reform. Challenging certainly, but not beyond the realms of possibility, after all, the USA faced significant obstacles in the sixties and early seventies such as the Vietnam War and the 1973 Oil Crisis. It then took further ten years of reform and Reaganomics, all under the shadow of the Cold War, to propel the US to economic superstardom.

Brazil's GDP now stands at the adjusted figure for the US in 1951, so there is a long way to go, but there is no doubt Brazilians firmly believe their time has come.

Evidently, they are not alone, a recent article in Isto É magazine highlights a growing problem for the Brazilian Polícia Federal, where just like in the US, coyotes - or their Brazilian counterparts the coiotes - are making big money smuggling foreigners into the country.

There have been cases of groups of Haitians, Koreans, Chinese and Bengalis paying up to US$ 10,000 to make the perilous journey into Brazil from Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay to work in the megacity of São Paulo and take their part in the Brazilian Dream.

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