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The Law of the Third

From Cold War strategy to the roar of airways over São Paulo neighborhoods

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ABSTRACT

The author recalls his scholarship at the University of Strasbourg in 1958/1959, at the height of the Cold War, when he learned of the so-called "law of the third": American bases permanently kept a third of their fleet airborne, ready to attack, producing a continuous, mournful noise that nonetheless conveyed a sense of protection. Drawing on that memory, he criticizes the harmful effects of the airways that today cross strictly residential neighborhoods of São Paulo, such as Alto dos Pinheiros, where planes and helicopters pass at very low altitude at any hour. He suggests the problem has a simple solution: to reroute the airways over rivers, major avenues, and industrial areas, at higher altitudes, distributing the noise evenly. He concludes that the law of the third protected, whereas the current "law of the three thirds" assaults the population.

KEYWORDS: *law of the third; cold war; noise pollution; airways; são paulo; quality of life*

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In 1958/1959 I held a scholarship from the French Government / Capes at the University of Strasbourg, in Alsace. World War II had ended in 1945, and the Cold War, which began in 1947, was at its height. All the American military bases stationed in Europe remained on constant alert.

The strategy for minimizing any surprise air attack followed what was called the law of the third, which required that a third of the fleet be permanently kept away from the base. Thus, the aircraft stayed in the air, ready to bomb the enemy immediately.

It was winter, cold at -20°C , with heavy snow, short and gloomy days, the sun never appearing, and very long nights. The aircraft from the nearby military base came and went as far as Czechoslovakia. They produced a dreadful, intermittent noise that lasted the entire time. It

was mournful and melancholy, yet deep down one felt that they were there to protect us.

Today, in full peace, we have in São Paulo the harmful effects of our airways passing over strictly residential neighborhoods, even far from Congonhas Airport, as in the case of Alto dos Pinheiros, where planes and helicopters pass at very low altitude in the morning, afternoon, evening, or the middle of the night. There are moments when you get the impression they are inside your home!

Clearly the problem has a solution: it is enough for the airways to pass over rivers, major avenues, industrial and commercial districts, or even over residential areas at higher altitudes, distributing the noise evenly among them all.

The law of the third was for protection; we have the law of the three thirds for aggression.
