



ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866-70 by Thomas L. Whigham

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INTRODUCTION

The hot breath of war blew furiously across South America during the summer of 1865, and, like the sand-laden *viento norte* that regularly sweeps the south-central parts of the continent, it was a merciless wind. It spared neither man nor animal; alike it blasted churches, ranch houses, and the whitewashed huts of the poor; and it caused otherwise level-headed people to contemplate killing on a vast scale. Worst of all, the violence had only just begun, for nearly five more years would pass before side arms were holstered, and swords returned to their scabbards.

As the Paraguayan War (1864–1870)—also known as the War of the Triple Alliance—unfolded, it brought the usual litany of human disasters, and perhaps a bit more. The Paraguayan War enjoys the dubious distinction of being the bloodiest inter-state war ever fought in South America—and yet it is easily the least understood. Like many serious conflicts, it offers a chance to reflect on the folly of human interactions, the bravery of individual fighters, the stupidity, the confusion, the terror, the camaraderie, and the willingness of people to sacrifice themselves for a cause. But the Paraguayan campaign was unusual in that it went on and on beyond all reason, so much so that contemporary observers—and modern historians—have had a difficult time trying to understand it.

The war began, like a great many wars of the nineteenth century, as an outgrowth of differing views on borders, national identities, and power relations in a continent little accustomed to self-rule. Control over the Platine waterways—the Paraná, Paraguay, and Uruguay Rivers—remained a strategic goal for most of the governments involved, just as it had for the previous colonial regimes. But honor was also at stake, as was personal interest. In these ways the war was straightforward enough at the beginning. But it soon evolved into a struggle for survival, not just for individual soldiers, but for the Paraguayan people as a whole.

While the inhabitants of South America had inherited a vast geographical space from Spain and Portugal, the former colonial empires gave them only the barest notion of how to govern their new nations after independence in the 1810s and '20s.¹ Political systems and visions of the future were bitterly

contested. Social elites and political factions in the two largest countries, Brazil and Argentina, had to concern themselves with administering thousands of miles of coastlines, grasslands, mountains, and forested hills. The very size of these territories frustrated attempts at governance on all sides, and those who aspired to the status of statesmen worried about how much they ought to draw from colonial precedents or break with the past. Brazilian and Argentine elites offered their peoples distinct models of nationhood—the former monarchical and slavocrat, the latter oligarchical. Both options had advantages and disadvantages, yet it was never clear which model could better meet the political aspirations of the greatest number of people. Besides, in both countries there were provincial chieftains, or *caudillos*, who for opportunistic reasons wished to frustrate the consolidation of any political order they could not control.

And then there was the exceptional case of Paraguay. Located far up the rivers in the South American interior, the Republic of Paraguay offered to a largely heterogeneous, Guaraní-speaking people a frankly dictatorial model that promised order amid every uncertainty. Authoritarianism had a long pedigree in the country, with some scholars tracing its roots to eighteenth-century Jesuit influences.² While the missionary priests may or may not have convinced their Indigenous charges that salvation was ultimately contingent on unquestioning obedience, the governments that came to power after independence clearly convinced the majority of Paraguayans of the need to obey their dictates as the price of national survival. The fact that most people in the country already harbored a xenophobic mistrust of outsiders made it easier to accept the leaders' decisions for the community as a whole. So it had been during the Supreme Dictatorship of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814–1840) and the only slightly more liberal presidency of Carlos Antonio López (1844–1862).³ And when the latter's eldest son, Francisco Solano López (1826–1870), inherited the mantle of power from his father, he hoped to use his considerable legitimacy to keep Paraguay free from trouble with its neighbors. In fact, López steered the country directly into a hornet's nest.

Many writers have portrayed the younger López as either a hero or a despot.⁴ He was clearly a bit of both. But he was also the leader of a nation at war, who was challenged mercilessly by the enemy and by his own preconceptions about statecraft and duty; as will become clear, he had a great many human weaknesses, too. And yet he often showed military skill, especially while on the defensive. His selfishness and physical cowardice have been condemned, but in trying to understand his behavior we might keep in mind that we do not know how his opponents would have acted in his place. They, too, had to act under pressure and sometimes cracked. All of them were affected by the fighting.

The Paraguayan War stemmed from ongoing debates over the status of the Banda Oriental, the Spanish-speaking territory along the northern bank of the Río de la Plata that had been fashioned into the independent Oriental

Republic of Uruguay in 1828. The establishment of this new nation—which was separated from Paraguay by three hundred miles—was the result of a political compromise that satisfied neither the Brazilians nor their Argentine rivals, nor their respective surrogates in the region. Two political factions, the Colorado and Blanco Parties, had jostled for power ever since, appealing for support to whatever friends they could find beyond Uruguay's borders, without ever managing to dominate the government in Montevideo, the Oriental capital, for any length of time. A series of civil wars was the inevitable result.

By the early 1860s, these tensions had come to threaten the broader peace in the Platine region. Across the river in Buenos Aires, President Bartolomé Mitre (1821–1906) had recently triumphed over provincial caudillos at the battle of Pavón, and now sought the restoration of Argentina's traditional hegemony over Uruguay. Next door in Brazil, however, various members of the emperor's government were thinking along similar lines. Pedro II (1825–1891) had seen his country torn by civil conflicts only a few years earlier and now felt anxious to see his rule properly consolidated. His ministers argued that this meant developing a sphere of influence in the Río de la Plata, especially in Uruguay, where the Portuguese had exercised considerable influence in colonial times.

In taking this stand, the politicians were egged on by Brazilian ranchers who owned land in the Oriental Republic and who felt vexed that the Blanco government had required them to pay taxes like other landowners. The emperor himself attempted to stay aloof from these questions of diplomacy, but certain influential members of Parliament were not so squeamish. Some even felt receptive to the suggestion that Brazil should intervene militarily in the Banda Oriental. Thus the empire could uphold the immediate interests of the Brazilian ranchers while simultaneously assuring long-term imperial advantages in the region by sponsoring the caudillo Venancio Flores (1808–1868), a man of decidedly traditional sensibilities, more at home in the saddle than in the halls of government. Flores had been a perennial contender for power in Uruguay, and would see to it that the Colorados would replace the Blancos in Montevideo and presumably follow a pro-Brazilian line from that point forward. The fact that Flores also enjoyed the tacit support of Mitre meant that the Blancos lacked any obvious foreign support and would necessarily have to find new friends or else yield to Flores.

It was in these circumstances that the Blancos turned to López and Paraguay. Had their appeal for support been made to Dr. Francia or the elder López it would certainly have been spurned as impractical and politically unwise. But the younger López lived in a different era of Paraguayan national development, and thus had different ambitions. The country's isolation over the previous decades had been the stuff of legend in South America, and many statesmen still could not fathom how to best cultivate good relations with its government.⁵ In fact, during the 1850s, the prickly Carlos Antonio López waded

into minor confrontations with Brazil, Britain, France, Argentina, and even the United States, which sent a flotilla up the Paraná River to force the resolution of an incident in which an American sailor was killed.⁶

Paraguay had backed down in all these confrontations, a humiliation of sorts that the younger López had never forgotten. It convinced him that the country's security could not be secured through negotiations with foreign powers—it would take a strong army. With this in mind, he used his position as his father's war minister to build a substantial military. The armed forces he created may not have been as awe-inspiring as later commentators claimed, but it featured some modern aspects, and it employed near-universal conscription, something that was absent in Brazil and Argentina.⁷

As Paraguay developed a respectable military force, Solano López began to conceive of a greater role for his country in broader Platine affairs. This was not an entirely inappropriate desire. During the struggle that the Argentine Confederation had experienced with the breakaway province of Buenos Aires between 1858 and 1859, the contending parties had actually called upon López to act as mediator, a role carried out with dignity and evenhandedness, and for which he was widely praised by the Porteños (inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires).⁸ Given his ambition and point of view, it was natural that when the Banda Oriental was convulsed by the Flores revolt from 1863 to 1864, he would presume that the belligerents would turn to him for help.

Only the Blancos did so. They were desperate for support, having been rejected by traditional friends in the Argentine provinces and elsewhere, and now faced with the possibility of an imminent Brazilian invasion. Blanco diplomats in Asunción, the Paraguayan capital, approached López with a new and curious argument about power relations that had been inspired by events in Europe, but which they now hoped to apply to the crisis in the Plata. They maintained that the empire, in contemplating an aggrandized role in the Banda Oriental, was threatening a balance of power that had assured the general peace in the region, and that if the Brazilians were successful in this endeavor, Uruguay would soon fall, but then so would Paraguay.

It is not clear that López bought every aspect of this argument, though it later appeared as a sort of gospel truth in his government's proclamations and decrees. What does seem likely is that he felt that the events in Uruguay required some demonstration of seriousness on his part.⁹ And once he had decided on the necessity of action, events started to take their own baleful course.

Flores received some not-so-clandestine supplies of arms from Buenos Aires throughout 1864.¹⁰ While this was happening, Brazilian politicians issued a series of threats to the Blancos, who instructed their representatives in Asunción to pressure López for some kind of commitment. Instead, he issued letters of concern, which the politicians in Rio and Buenos Aires dismissed. Then, after the Brazilians formally threatened military intervention against

the government in Montevideo, López issued an ultimatum on 30 August, announcing that the “Republic of Paraguay would consider any occupation of Uruguayan territory by imperial forces ... as an attack upon the balance of power of the Platine states,” and an action requiring an immediate response. As López also warned, the Paraguayan government disclaimed “any responsibility for the ultimate consequences.”¹¹

Though a *casus belli* could not have been more clearly defined, the Brazilians chose to ignore the note. Imperial troops crossed the Uruguayan frontier on 16 October 1864 and swiftly drove the Blanco troops into strongholds at Salto and Paysandú. Flores soon coordinated his efforts with those of the intervening forces, breaking all resistance at Salto within a matter of weeks and laying siege to Paysandú. The Blanco minister to Asunción urged López to move expeditiously in accordance with his previous ultimatum, but for a time he vacillated, evidently hoping that the Brazilians would come to their senses. Then, on 12 November he sent his naval units to seize the Brazilian steamer *Marqués de Olinda*, which had passed upriver from Asunción the previous day on its way to Corumbá in Mato Grosso. The Brazilian officers and crew, who had not expected a confrontation, now found themselves prisoners, unsure of what would happen next. López had no such doubts. His country now had a sizable army and navy, though not nearly as large as that of the empire, and it seemed as if time were running against him. “If we don’t have a war now with Brazil,” he remarked, “we shall have one at a less convenient time for ourselves.”¹² Thus he decided to sow the wind. His country would reap the whirlwind.

In my earlier study, *The Paraguayan War, Causes and Early Conduct*, I offered a detailed analysis of the offensive that Marshal López launched, first against Brazil, and then against Argentina, between 1864 and 1865. The campaign took a simple, if not quite predictable, course. As a landlocked country, Paraguay had always suffered from a strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis its neighbors; it thus needed to act with care and hopefully with the aid of allies like the Uruguayan Blancos. In a surprise move, however, the army of Marshal López surged not to the south, to aid the Blancos in Uruguay, but to the north, where it seized some waterlogged districts (and stockpiled armaments) in Mato Grosso. Thereafter the Paraguayans faced a dilemma. To link up with their Uruguayan allies—or what was left of them—they needed to move southward as quickly as possible, probably by way of the rivers. But this led in short order to a seemingly insurmountable barrier—Argentine neutrality—which the government in Buenos Aires strongly defended, and which it was unlikely to waive in order to permit the Paraguayan army to strike across its national territory.

López’s answer to the problem of transit was typically unambiguous—he attacked, occupying the port of Corrientes in April 1865, and ordered his army into northeastern Argentina and Rio Grande do Sul in two widely dispersed columns. From the outset, this invasion seemed risky. Neither the Argentines

nor their new allies in Brazil and Uruguay could hope to counter its effects in the short term, but since the Marshal had little hope of defeating these countries, all his opponents needed was a series of delaying actions to slow his progress. Eventually, a war of attrition would evolve, one that would distinctly favor Paraguay's enemies. López, they presumed, would sue for peace.

The Paraguayans, however, enjoyed a few advantages. There was no reason, for instance, to suppose that the Argentines and Brazilians would cooperate effectively, since they had never done so previously. The Marshal's action had tethered the two powers in an unnatural alliance with Flores, who had just succeeded in obliterating the Blanco stronghold at Paysandú. This apparent victory might now work against the Argentines and Brazilians, who were sure to squabble over the spoils. Besides, the Paraguayans expected to receive concrete aid from anti-Brazilian and anti-Porteño factions in the Argentine Litoral and Uruguay. Seven months later each of these assumptions was laid bare by the facts. The Marshal's exhausted troops stumbled back into Paraguay from Corrientes to reconsider their position. They were badly chastened, to be sure, but they were not defeated.

López's offensive in Corrientes and Rio Grande do Sul in 1865 revealed strengths and weaknesses on both sides. The Allies—Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—had made no initial preparations to counter any Paraguayan attack; they conducted raids and minor guerrilla actions, but they developed no general plan for resistance. As López had predicted, they bickered among themselves over strategy, tactics, and command. Like the proverbial scorpion and turtle, they mistrusted each other's motives, and saw only minimal need to share supplies and transport. Morale was low.

Even so, the alliance between Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay held, and López provided the reason. In order to preserve itself, a small country surrounded by unfriendly neighbors either must exploit the jealousies that exist outside its borders, or else find some way to stay aloof. For many years, Paraguay had pursued the latter course, but the Marshal's rapid expansion of his military forces, his unpredictability, and his arrogance convinced many in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro to doubt him more than they doubted each other. Besides, they reasoned, he had drawn the first blood and now had to pay the price for his conceit.

Ultimately, when forces friendly to López failed to materialize in Corrientes, his men had to face an increasingly well-armed and better-organized enemy without any benefit of succor. The Paraguayan offensive soon began to sputter out. First came a disastrous river engagement at the Riachuelo in June 1865, during which Paraguay lost the use of the Paraná River as its main supply route for troops and supplies. This was followed by a land battle at Yataí in August—another defeat—that set the stage for a protracted siege at Uruguai in Rio Grande do Sul, and ultimately for the surrender of its

starving and demoralized garrison one month later. Put together, these encounters cost López more than a third of his army. He had no choice but to pull his remaining forces back to Paraguay and into the labyrinthine swamps that guarded his great fortress of Humaitá.

Few on the Allied side had doubted that victory would eventually be theirs. The Marshal had exhausted his diplomatic options, and the Brazilians and Argentines had isolated his country with an impenetrable blockade. López had lost the better part of his river fleet and some thirty to forty thousand dead, wounded, and missing by the beginning of 1866.¹³ Dysentery hit many of the survivors, and cases of measles and smallpox had cropped up in the ranks. It could only be a matter of time before the Paraguayans yielded.

And yet, the Marshal succeeded in rallying his troops, who had no intention of admitting defeat. He argued—unconvincingly—that the Allies had purposely sent infected troops through the lines to introduce smallpox into Paraguay, and that his brave stalwarts would survive even this example of perfidy.¹⁴ Foreign observers tended to treat such hyperbole as the product of panic. In their eyes, logic demanded a prompt end to hostilities, either through direct negotiation or some frank admission of the military facts at the beginning of 1866.

Instead, as this study will show, the fighting went on. My earlier account addressed the causes and earliest stages of the war, when the Paraguayans still believed that their offensive was unstoppable. The present one traces what happened afterwards, how the Marshal's men endured everything that the Allies could throw at them in a defense that lasted four years. The Paraguayans gave up only bit by bit, losing an enormous number of men until the final resisters died in combat alongside Marshal López in March 1870. How they kept up the fight while their country was tumbling down around them is at the center of this story, which even the most implacable enemies of the Marshal see as an epic as well as a tragedy.

During the war, diplomats and foreign observers consistently expressed a desire for peace. But the rationalizations that they voiced in favor of a negotiated settlement left the common Paraguayan soldier unconvinced and ambitious generals on all sides thirsting for further measures of glory. As I will show, aspiration outweighed prudence until very late in the day—a sad truth for which López and the Allied leaders must share the blame.¹⁵

Brazil's Pedro II regarded the struggle against Paraguay as a kind of personal crusade. He was a thoughtful yet rather peevish individual, and, as a sovereign, was keenly aware of his duties and prerogatives. He considered Brazil a civilized, if flawed, realm whose dignity the Marshal had offended with his invasion of Mato Grosso. While the physical immensity of the empire might have mitigated the need to respond to such pinpricks, in fact the government in Rio had a surprisingly fragile structure—more like a piece of fine china than an iron chisel. Slavery had already blotted Brazil's reputation in the eyes of the world,

and there was no need to likewise admit to weakness vis-à-vis an ambitious tyrant like López. To move beyond Brazil's obvious defects, to allow the noble spirit of his empire to shine through, and to spread civilization to a benighted people, Pedro needed an absolute victory over Paraguay; for him, the road to Brazil's future had to pass through Asunción. This was not so much a matter of seeking vengeance against López as it was a way of setting the universe right. Along the way, Pedro and his ministers—who should have known better—became prisoners of an unbending policy.

Bartolomé Mitre, the Argentine president and overall Allied commander at the beginning of the conflict, was cut of a less refined but worldlier cloth: his was a bourgeois background, not a regal one. He had weaned himself on the grittiest political infighting while in exile in Montevideo in the 1840s and '50s, and afterwards traded his bloody shirt for the frock coat of the cultured statesman. Nonetheless he was most comfortable writing diatribes in the editorial offices of his newspaper, *La Nación Argentina*, or in drawing-room debate; an austere and distant palace held no charms for him. Unlike Pedro, Mitre saw the struggle against Paraguay in political terms, and like a chess player, he treated armies as pawns that might be sacrificed so long as it brought the requisite gain. So it had been during the 1850s, when Mitre's partisans ousted one set of rural caudillos and stalemated another. Driving López out of Corrientes gave Mitre still greater leverage over his domestic opponents in Argentina, and he could ill afford to squander this advantage. Nor did he intend to concede to the Brazilians a larger sphere of influence on the continent than they already enjoyed. Taking Asunción could undercut his enemies on all sides, and might even herald the unification of the Plata under an unquestioned Porteño hegemony.

Such thoughts might have animated Mitre, but they were repellant, of course, to López. The Paraguayan leader had launched the war in an illusory quest to impose—or restore—a balance of power in the region. In the Marshal's view, the liberal and supposedly progressive forces in the Plata (as represented by the oligarchs of Buenos Aires) had united with Brazilian monarchists to stifle "true American republicanism." The troubles in Uruguay were thus an augury of what would happen if López could not guarantee for Paraguay its rightful share of power and prestige. Now, come what may, the enemy had to be combated by deed as well as by word.

As the Allies pressed hard upon the Paraguayan frontier the nature of the war changed, but the Marshal stayed the same. His family had ruled Paraguay since 1841, ushering the country away from the traditional social patterns of the eighteenth century toward those of a modern capitalist state. There were many benefits to this modernization, but also many costs, of which López himself surely was one. Paraguay now had a constitution comparable to that of many new nations in Latin America; it had a cash economy and a growing export trade in cattle, tobacco, hides, and yerba mate; it had a responsible state apparatus,

with a sizeable bureaucracy and a rational tax system; it even had primary education and a weekly newspaper. At the same time, however, far too much power was concentrated in the hands of the López family. Francisco Solano López never hesitated to use—and abuse—this power. His brash and sensual impulses, so noticeable in his youth, still dominated his heart. He was attracted to low women and fine uniforms like a child to a pretty toy, and like a child, he could never admit a mistake; it followed, then, that his army's reverses in Corrientes and Rio Grande would be blamed on his subordinates, against whom he always directed a cascade of invective. After Uruguaiana fell, he singled out Antonio de la Cruz Estigarribia, the colonel who had surrendered the garrison, threatening him with heavy consequences should he ever fall into Paraguayan hands, and consigning his wife and family to the streets. Then, to the officers assembled at Humaitá, he issued a stern warning:

I am working for my country, for the good and honor of you all, and none help me. I stand alone—I have confidence in none of you—I cannot trust one amongst you. ... *Cuidado!* But take care! Hitherto I have pardoned offenses, taken pleasure in pardoning, but now, from this day, I pardon no one.¹⁶

There was calculation as well as bad temper in this attitude. López's attitudes suggested that the rabble—of which he considered his men members—had to be led by terror as much as by example.¹⁷

On their side, the Allies liked to think that a broad patriotism inspired their soldiers. Presuming that this was the case, they thought it a simple matter to turn the Marshal's violent predilection towards his own people to their advantage. In a letter to Washington, the US minister to Asunción noted the common presumption among Allied officers that Paraguayan obstinacy amounted to "a superstitious fear and belief that if they fail[ed] to obey orders to the fullest extent they [would] sooner or later fall into the hands of López and then be put to inconceivable torture."¹⁸ Surely this situation favored the Allied cause—or so the men in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires wanted to believe.

In truth, as I hope to show, the Paraguayans were motivated by something more powerful than fear. López could command obedience from his soldiers and suppress every inkling of dissent, but he could not command courage: the Paraguayans gave this of their own volition, for although they knew that López and the nation were not one and the same, they nonetheless accepted the basic need to defend home and family.¹⁹ Certainly the Marshal could arouse great trepidation, just as the Allies had claimed. But then, what else could they say? To admit that the Paraguayans acted from a love of country that went beyond submission to the López family might legitimize their struggle, which was the last thing that Mitre and the others wished to do. Allied leaders could speak

contemptuously of the Paraguayans' "blind" or slavish loyalty, but still they envied it.

Constancy is but one element in war, and the operation of armies and logistical networks will also receive attention in the following pages. British military engineer George Thompson, who would one day rise to the rank of colonel on López's staff, noted how grateful the Marshal's men felt in late 1865 to be back in Paraguay. Regrouping near the perimeter of Humaitá, they slept, sent messages to their families, and received medical attention.²⁰ Those who were badly wounded were evacuated to Asunción or to the army's hospitals at Cerro León.

The men who stayed behind at Humaitá initially had plenty of food. The officers ordered the men to reinforce the defenses at the main camp, and dispatched new units to the auxiliary works at Itapirú and Santa Teresa, both on the Paraná River. Another three thousand men under Major Manuel Núñez rode east to Encarnación to guard against any Allied attacks that might come through Misiones. A spate of rest revived the Paraguayan troops, who now could prepare for a long siege. The Marshal's men moved quickly to refit the eight batteries at Humaitá with gabions of packed earth. They built a new series of huts and powder magazines and dug some rudimentary trenches. What was left of the Paraguayan navy busied itself in logistical support, ferrying munitions and foodstuffs from Asunción.²¹ Cattle and horses were likewise driven southward along a meandering route through the Ñe'embucú swamplands to Humaitá.

In order to repulse any Allied invasion, López also needed to strengthen his defenses along the Paraná. His father had long before established a military post at Itapirú, located along the shortest invasion route from the Allied camps in Corrientes. This same "fort" had witnessed an armed confrontation with the US warship *Water Witch* in the late 1850s, and the younger López had never forgotten its strategic significance. Now he dispatched his engineers to build hidden batteries at nearby Paso de la Patria. They erected "a fine work, with redans and curtains, resting on two lagoons and impassible *carrizal* [sloughs], and mounting thirty field guns" and other smaller pieces.²² It was no Sebastopol, nor even an Humaitá, but before the Allies could even think of raiding Paraguayan territory they would have to get past it.

López showed great enthusiasm in directing the work at Paso de la Patria. Thanks to a new recruitment campaign he had already assembled another thirty thousand troops to add to those he already had at Humaitá, giving him a total of eighteen battalions of infantry, eighteen regiments of cavalry, and two of artillery.²³ Though his army now included many old men and teenaged boys, in numbers alone it represented a formidable challenge to the Allies. The new troops clearly intended a long stay. They reached Paso by December 1865, and immediately began to sow the adjacent fields with Indian corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes, manioc, garbanzos, and other crops. They also constructed hundreds

of thatched huts, built an extensive line of trenches, and moved sixty pieces of artillery into strategic spots.²⁴

Across the Paraná, Allied preparations were more spasmodic. Horses, munitions, and foodstuffs remained in short supply. In their retreat from Corrientes, López's men had stripped the province's farms and ranch lands of everything, including some one hundred thousand head of cattle that they drove across the river to Paraguay.²⁵ The Brazilian, Argentine, and Uruguayan commissariats needed provisions and could not make good these losses right away. Heavy rains interrupted the northward flow of supplies by land. This left the Allied troops to subsist on what could be transported upriver on merchant or naval vessels—support that always seemed slipshod, inadequate, or reluctantly given.²⁶ In the end, it took five months to properly establish forward bases in Corrientes. Entrerriano Governor Justo José de Urquiza, once the most powerful figure in all of Argentina, provided the greatest number of cattle and horses for the camps, and also sent some of the toughest and most practiced fighters in the region. It was a mixed blessing, however: units from Entrerriano had already disbanded at Toledo and Basualdo some months earlier, and some of the disaffected men had been pressed back into the Allied forces. Many of the Argentine provincials—not just the Entrerrianos—detested the Brazilians, whom they suspected of expansionist designs in the Litoral.²⁷ To these men, López posed the lesser danger, and, indeed, his political ideas had more in common with their own than either's did with the Argentine national government. Now that the Paraguayans had abandoned Corrientes, they felt that Mitre ought to negotiate an early end to the conflict rather than sheepishly follow the Brazilian lead.

For their part, Pedro's troops chafed under Argentine command. Most officers—and certainly most state ministers—regretted the emperor's earlier concession in Rio Grande, by which Mitre retained command over Allied forces even while on Brazilian soil. They reciprocated the bad feelings directed at them and bristled at every show of Argentine highhandedness. The internal problems of the Litoral provinces were of no concern to them—pursuing the war against Paraguay was.

The longer the Allied troops went without fighting their common enemy, the better the Paraguayans' chances of watching these units dissolve as a coherent force. The Triple Alliance of Brazil, Argentina, and the newly conquered Uruguay linked three governments to the common end of destroying López. But smooth cooperation among them proved elusive. Mitre had to keep this fact constantly in mind as he pondered his next move. Several options suggested themselves. As early as September 1865, the Brazilian military engineer André Rebouças composed a "Project for the Prompt Conclusion of the Campaign against Paraguay". It presented a dispassionate recounting of Allied strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the Marshal. Rebouças claimed that

battlefield reverses had brought Paraguayan morale to its lowest point since the war began. The arms captured from the enemy, he noted, included the most antiquated flintlocks, unrifled cannons, locally made sabers, and bamboo lances.

All this contrasted with the strength of the Allied armies, which boasted a well-equipped and vigorous force ready to slash its way northward at any time. Rebouças recognized that certain deficiencies, especially the lack of adequate mounts, might delay the Allied advance for a time. Yet, this was a minor matter. While the army waited, Brazilian ironclads could pulverize the earthworks below Humaitá just as the Yankees had done at Fort Henry during the US Civil War. A short but unrelenting siege of the fortress would commence once the Allies crossed into Paraguay, and Marshal López would strike his colors shortly thereafter.²⁸

Rebouças's plan reflected accepted military thinking among the Brazilians, but the Argentines were less sanguine about the war ending quickly. The Paraguayans had fought the Argentines in 1849, and on that occasion, the barefooted soldiers of López's father had not acted like the sort of men who would easily crumble before superior force.²⁹ The Argentines also understood better than the policymakers in Rio the difficulty of the terrain they needed to traverse should the Allied navies fail to force the rivers. Perhaps most critically, the Argentines recognized their own domestic weaknesses better than the Brazilians did. Despite Mitre's rash prediction of "to the barracks in twenty-four hours, to the field in fifteen days, and to Asunción in three months,"³⁰ the Argentine national army needed more time to become fully operational. It had only been established in 1864 and still seemed woefully unprepared. Worst of all, it lacked the unqualified support of the Argentine public.

Furthermore, Argentine leaders quietly perceived what should have been obvious: the war had failed to stir popular support in either their country or Brazil. Such a reaction, smacking in some quarters of indifference, might eventually undermine the whole campaign. The Brazilian public initially responded to the war with a strong show of volunteerism, offering the government everything from good wishes to money to shirts for the troops.³¹ The ranks of the *Voluntários da Pátria*, or volunteer units, swelled into the thousands. Few noticed at that moment that sympathy for the fight seemed strongest in the provinces that abutted the Plata. Men whose families owned property in the Banda Oriental saw the struggle against Paraguay as a reasonable business, even congenial up to a point. In Pernambuco and other areas of the north and northeast, on the other hand, draft evasions and a general contempt for the fighting were already in evidence. The northeasterners tended to be individualists, like the gauchos of the Pampas, and their unit of community never extended beyond the clan.³² At a local level this may have been a source of strength, but it contributed to Brazil's weakness as a nation. Even now, forty years after independence, many northeasterners still found it painful to subordinate their

interests to those of Rio de Janeiro. And unlike the southerners—who had seen their own lands invaded by López—these men regarded Paraguay as impossibly far away. They might periodically join in verbally abusing the Marshal, but they showed little enthusiasm for the cause, and sent few troops as a result.

In Argentina and Uruguay, the situation was worse, with large portions of the population either disaffected from their governments' military campaign in Paraguay (and from the cost in lives and resources it occasioned) or secretly supporting López. So-called Americanist factions commanded considerable respect in the Litoral provinces and to a lesser extent in Buenos Aires. Neither the famous jurist Juan Bautista Alberdi, nor the willful son of Urquiza, nor José Hernández, future author of *Martín Fierro*, made any effort to conceal their dislike of the national government's pro-Brazilian stance. And they were not the only dissenters. In the western provinces, Mitre's governors had to use iron shackles to smooth their recruitment efforts.³³ As for the Banda Oriental, public opinion there held that Uruguay's participation in the Paraguayan War was nothing more than Flores's way of paying a political debt to Mitre and the Brazilians.³⁴

The sense of uncertainty so common in the Allied countries found no parallel on the Paraguayan side. From the distance of one hundred forty years, it is easy to stress the authoritarian aspect of the López regime in explaining the coherence of the Paraguayan response to the war. And yet the Paraguayan people were not simply browbeaten into putting up a good fight—they accepted the burden of defending their country because it came naturally to them. They saw their homes and way of life threatened; any struggle to repel foreign invaders thus seemed to them legitimate and honorable. Perhaps this did signal López's manipulation of his people—he was a skilled propagandist who knew how to appeal to the Paraguayan masses in the Guaraní language they understood and cherished. But to relegate popular support for the war to a nebulous realm of false consciousness misses the fact that the Paraguayans had already reflected soberly on their situation. They knew what the stakes were and if they could not win the war, perhaps they could at least make it unwinnable for the enemy. Negotiation was not an option; neither was surrender. If the Allies chose to continue the fight, then they would reap only the blackest of tragedies together with their Paraguayan opponents. On the long road to Armageddon, all would suffer.

