



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

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## THE ALLIES STUMBLE

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Save for the ultra-chauvinistic writers working for *El Semanario*, no one, on either side, had predicted the scale of the Paraguayan victory at Curupayty. In its simplest form, the Allied failure reflected an underappreciation of Paraguayan strengths. Though the Marshal's soldiers had only just completed the trench works at Curupayty, they were good defenses, well-guarded by experienced gunners with ample shot and powder. The local terrain also favored the Paraguayans, who enjoyed clear fields of fire, except on the extreme flanks—and even here, brush or deep water hindered the Allied advance. The imperial navy could possibly have suppressed Paraguayan fire, had the preliminary bombardment hit any of the main batteries. But this did not happen: Tamandaré claimed to have pulverized the enemy works, when in fact he had hardly touched them. The smoke and thunder had obscured his failure, and the admiral flattered himself with an imaginary victory.

This fundamental mistake was not the only one that Allied commanders committed. Porto Alegre could have sent out scouts in advance of the attack. He could have built mangrulllos at Curuzú to scan the nearest line of trenches in order to gauge the enemy's potential strength. He did neither. But Mitre must also share the blame. His Brazilian subordinates had bristled under his direction, doubted his strategy of continued confrontation at the Bellaco, and pointed to the earlier victory at Curuzú to illustrate what they could accomplish when final authority over military matters rested with them. Such attitudes may have smacked of insubordination, but the Argentine president refused to force the Brazilians to toe the line. He was worn down by the near-constant bickering with Tamandaré and Porto Alegre. Perhaps he reasoned that, having missed

the chance for a settlement with López, the time had come for a decisive action along the lines suggested by the Brazilians. Curupayty provided a direct means to test this contention.

From late September 1866 to August 1867, when the Allies resumed their original tactic of outflanking the Paraguayans, the front remained static.<sup>1</sup> Whole weeks went by without any meaningful contact between enemies, apart from the occasional shouted insult or sniper's shot. The fleet regularly laid barrages in the direction of Curupayty, "thinking nothing of throwing 2,000 shells before breakfast," but little damage ensued.<sup>2</sup> This eleven-month period might be considered a breathing space or an unfortunate delay. But such interludes in war usually present opportunities for broad reflection and redefinition, and so it was after Curupayty.

## Exit Flores

No sooner had the news of the setback reached the Allied camp at Tuyutí than General Flores packed his bags and set sail for Montevideo. He had intended to leave for the south two weeks earlier but had stayed on in order to participate in a battle in which his role was negligible and his performance lackluster.<sup>3</sup> His inability to rise to the occasion, though not his fault, was lost in the general gloom of defeat, and ultimately counted for little. He left behind General Enrique Castro, who now commanded a token force only nominally Uruguayan in composition. Though the División Oriental, as it was known, continued to maintain some semblance of the national standard in the fields of Paraguay, it remained for all intents and purposes irrelevant. Flores had been one of the war's outstanding personalities; tenacious, if not always thoughtful, he had favored a gaucho manner of fighting in which charisma and a lion-hearted audacity counted far more than strategy.<sup>4</sup> His departure from the front brought an end to that older, more personalized style of war making.

Just before leaving, Flores issued a proclamation calling upon all Allied soldiers to continue "along the honorable path ... so that each man would become a hero, destined to avenge the loss of illustrious [comrades such as] Sampaio, Rivero, Palleja, Argüero, and so many other noble victims immolated by the fanaticism of our enemies."<sup>5</sup> His defenders argued that "having finished the mission of a warrior, [Flores] now embarks on that of an administrator," but few apparently believed this.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the heroic caudillo now appeared as a defeated general slinking home in disgrace.

The Brazilians stayed loyal to Flores; they had little choice if they wanted to attain their policy goals in the Platine estuary: they still had troops stationed in Montevideo and along the frontier, and could guarantee internal peace in Uruguay after a fashion. But any dissension among the ruling Colorados cast

Brazil more obviously in the role of an occupying power and their leader—the president of the Oriental Republic of the Uruguay—as a lackey.

In light of the conflicts Flores faced on the domestic scene, he found it useful to treat his Brazilian sponsors with a newfound wariness. In a personal communication to Polidoro on 20 October, he affirmed his allegiance to the Allied cause and stated that he “would always side with the imperial government, without this [fact] signifying that [he] would ignore the advantages that might accrue from a dignified peace.”<sup>7</sup> This was certainly indicative of an ambiguous posture, but then again, Flores had also lost confidence in his Argentine allies. Upon his return to Montevideo, he instructed his personal secretary, Dr. Julio Herrera y Obes, to prepare for a confidential mission to Rio de Janeiro to report to dom Pedro on the inept comportment of Brazilian generals in the field, and on the “incompetence of General Mitre as commander-in-chief of the Allied forces.”<sup>8</sup> Flores considered the Argentine president his friend of many years standing and had fought by his side from the Bonaerense grasslands to the hill country of Santa Fe. Now his political survival at home depended on putting distance between himself and both his erstwhile Allies.

A day or two before Dr. Herrera left for his meeting with Pedro, Flores received a copy of a communication the Argentine cabinet had sent to Mitre on 26 September. Its contents confirmed Flores’s worst suspicions. The Porteños appeared eager to quit the war and authorized Mitre to reopen negotiations with Marshal López, separating Argentina from the Triple Alliance “in all that is neither transcendental nor compromises the honor and permanent interests of the republic.”<sup>9</sup> It appeared that the treaty of May 1865 now meant little to the Argentine national government. Flores instructed Herrera to ask the emperor point-blank how the Allies could continue to trust a man whose government had called for peace at any price.

## Out With the Old, In With the New

The pessimism with which Flores had to contemplate his options paralleled that of certain ministers and members of Parliament in Brazil. The news of Mitre’s meeting with López at Yataity Corã had been poorly received and had encouraged those who had always questioned the wisdom of an alliance with Argentina.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the nationalist fervor unleashed by the Paraguayan invasions of Mato Grosso and Rio Grande do Sul had evaporated. The various paeans to the victors of Curuzú now rang hollow, and a distinct feeling of weariness hung in the air.<sup>11</sup> Every man who could evade service in the National Guard now did so.<sup>12</sup> To make up the difference and to provide recruits for the regular army, officials resorted to forced conscription, a practice that one parliamentarian from Minas Gerais condemned as an excuse to dispose of personal enemies through outright kidnapping.<sup>13</sup> His attitude was not uncommon. There

were no longer any “children ardent for desperate glory,” and many Brazilians now considered the Paraguayan War the equivalent of a peptic ulcer—irritating, if not fatal.

Certain Brazilian statesmen wondered the same thing. Seven weeks before the Curupayty disaster, a new cabinet came into office. Headed by Zacharias de Góes e Vasconcelos, it was composed of Conservatives and moderate Liberals who had banded together in a “Progressive League.” The cabinet faced many opponents. The radical Liberals—those who had pushed the empire into the Uruguayan imbroglio in 1864 and who still professed the most enthusiasm for the war—opposed the ministry almost as much as did the old-guard Conservatives. The latter showed more concern about their exclusion from power than about the prosecution of the war. Too many outstanding issues urgently required attention, and most Brazilian politicians preferred to concentrate on those questions rather than continue the struggle with Paraguay.<sup>14</sup>

The one significant figure who remained focused on winning the final victory was Emperor Pedro II. Early in October he wrote: “They talk about peace in the Rio de la Plata but *I* won’t make peace with López, and public opinion is on my side; therefore I don’t doubt the honorable outcome of the campaign for Brazil.”<sup>15</sup> Whether the *vox populi* in Rio de Janeiro supported Pedro on the war was irrelevant, however; he could nominate or remove ministers as he saw fit. Given that fact, no politician, least of all Zacharias, could afford to make himself “incompatible” with Pedro.

A clean-shaven Conservative law professor and landowner from Bahia, the prime minister was well fitted to head the cabinet. Until the 1860s, his career had taken an orthodox course. He had served as president of three provinces before assuming office as a deputy, and in 1852, at the time of the Urquiza uprising against Rosas in Argentina, he joined the cabinet as its youngest minister. At the end of the decade, Zacharias found his political advancement blocked by the sclerotic Conservative senators, which left his continued success as a statesman in the hands of the emperor. When his third cabinet was established in 1866, Zacharias reluctantly submitted to the monarch’s demand to pursue the fight against Paraguay despite Curupayty. Pedro had insisted on victory as the only “honorable outcome of the campaign,” and once again, Zacharias did as his imperial majesty directed.

Neither an outright triumph nor an improvised peace could be achieved with the same strategy or under the same military leadership. Porto Alegre, Argolo, and Tamandaré, moreover, were all Liberals and each in his own way had sought to enhance the party’s standing in the imperial government, a goal that became unrealistic after 22 September. This left Polidoro, the Conservative commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, who had always seemed a better administrator than a field officer. Aged sixty-four, he suffered from neuralgia and recurrent fatigue and he told his officers that he would prefer to yield supreme command

to someone else.<sup>16</sup> But which general in the Brazilian army could rise above the misfortune of Curupaty and face the present adversity?

Only the emperor could say. In making his nomination, Pedro recognized that Zacharias, who had once argued for legal limitations on the imperial prerogative, now needed the monarch to cut the Gordian knot. Quietly and without fanfare Pedro put forward the name of the one man with sufficient prestige and experience to lead the imperial forces in Paraguay: Luís Alves de Lima e Silva, the Marquis of Caxias.

Born near Rio de Janeiro in 1803, Caxias was the scion of a notable family. He entered the army as a teenager and participated with distinction in every campaign in which the empire was involved. But Caxias was more than a good officer; the tactful and intelligent diplomacy he used in quelling the Farrapo secession in 1845 demonstrated an ability beyond the military sphere, hastening his entry onto the political stage, where he could always speak authoritatively. By the 1850s, Caxias was incontestably the army's most famous general, the most resourceful, and thus the most likely to succeed in any political endeavor.<sup>17</sup>

Caxias's aristocratic bearing was apparent to all of his contemporaries, but his character was decidedly intricate. Apprehensive in personality, he compensated by cultivating a demanding, even severe, professional standard. Over the years, his perfectionism manifested itself in impressive administrative skills, an unshakable loyalty to the monarch, and a broad military acumen. In Caxias's brain, moreover, there was always a guiding spirit that whispered: "control, control, control."<sup>18</sup> It made him the best candidate to save the Allied war effort. Polidoro had to preach to incredulous listeners, but the marquis's arguments always carried conviction.

As the emperor had noted some years earlier, "I believe Caxias to be loyal and my friend especially because he is so little a politician."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the marquis's father, a regent, had been close to those who had founded the Party of Order; it was hardly surprising that this connection, as well as his general outlook and his defense of the status quo aligned him with the Conservatives. That party, however, remained in opposition as the Triple Alliance War began.

Though Caxias appreciated the need for a unified campaign against López, he refused to cooperate on Zacharias's terms. A year earlier, the Progressives had kept him from the presidency of the province of Rio Grande do Sul. In addition, he was piqued that Zacharias had given the portfolio of war to Angelo Moniz da Silva Ferraz, a man whom the marquis detested. He therefore abstained from command in the earliest stages of the Paraguayan War. The defeat at Curupaty, however, placed the question of his participation in a different light. Even though Caxias was only one year younger than Polidoro, no one doubted his physical stamina or fitness for command.

The marquis's selection offered few immediate benefits for Zacharias and his colleagues. Given Caxias's party loyalties, the appointment meant admitting

a dissident into the inner circle of power. Though Pedro had urged the nomination, it proved difficult for the Progressives nonetheless; Ferraz, after all, was not only Zacharias's political ally, but a kinsman and a friend. Now the war minister was called upon to act the patriot, something he did not hesitate to do: he resigned the ministry at the beginning of October 1866. His replacement, João Lustosa da Cunha Paranaguá, wasted no time in aligning his policies with those of Caxias.

Having made the painful concession, Zacharias directed an evocative appeal to the marquis that stressed the same call of patriotism that had excited Ferraz. Caxias could not resist. He met with the various cabinet ministers in order to guarantee their future support for any strategies he might contemplate at the front. Then, donning his uniform, he embarked for Paraguay. As if to foreshadow the challenges that awaited him, the steam engine of the French packet *Carmel*, upon which he departed, soon broke down and had to be towed back to port. Caxias left aboard another vessel.<sup>20</sup>

## The Argentine Reaction

Mitre was waiting for Caxias. Of all the Allied leaders who faced the Paraguayans at Curupayty, the Argentine president received the most blame for the setback. His political opponents called him lazy and predictable, and hinted at his cowardice.<sup>21</sup> He had given the order for the ill-fated attack and now had to take responsibility for what had happened. Many families had lost sons, and there was no lack of people accusing Mitre for their misfortunes.<sup>22</sup>

Buenos Aires was a city that thrived on rumors, and the defeat in the north set off considerable speculation, subdued at first, then very vocal indeed. Certain members of the national government called for another round of negotiations with the Marshal. Others, still recalling the warnings of Alberdi and Guido y Spano, and moved by the desperate tales circulating in the streets, suggested withdrawal as soon as possible.<sup>23</sup> Only those closest to Mitre—Marcos Paz, Guillermo Rawson, and Rufino de Elizalde—continued to express full confidence in the president's military leadership. Elizalde, who was both foreign minister and Mitre's presumptive heir, ignored the political implications and persisted in treating the war as a narrowly military challenge.<sup>24</sup>

The optimism Elizalde expressed in this missive of 3 October was little better than flat champagne. Though still imbued with the "flavor" of a once serious and potent argument, it had lost its vitality as far as the Argentine public was concerned. Patriotism had been a powerful lever in the hands of the Porteño Liberals since before Mitre's victory over Urquiza at Pavón—but it was fast slipping away. Buenos Aires had arrayed itself in mourning, as required by tradition, but even the most lugubrious displays could not hide the fact that most people wanted the war pushed from the headlines.



In the minds of a great many Bonaerenses, Uruguay and Paraguay remained buffer states with little right to independent existence. Uruguay had fallen into its proper place in early 1865; that Paraguay had not followed suit could only be ascribed to incompetence—Mitre's, as military commander, or, more likely, his Brazilian allies', as fighters.<sup>25</sup> Few of the old Argentine fire-eaters would concede that the Paraguayans had won at Curupayty through skill and mettle, and yet the general opinion in Buenos Aires held otherwise. As *The Standard* observed:

We [thought that] the military strength of Paraguay was far inferior to its natural resources. The inhabitants have always been quiet and inoffensive, and extremely obedient, but the present war has no doubt called forth a warlike disposition, and this is enhanced by the studied care of President López to inculcate amongst his people the fixed belief that the humblest Paraguayan is more than a match for any foreigner. ... The tedious march of this campaign is fast converting this country of peasants into a nation of warriors, and the longer it lasts the more durable the change.<sup>26</sup>

With so many people questioning the pace, and, indeed, the value of the war effort, it took don Bartolo's associates weeks of concentrated work to shore up political support. Though chastened by recent events, these Liberals could still boast certain organizational advantages over the other factions, most of which represented a variety of regional and personal interests and found it difficult to work together as a result. Thus, when closing the congressional session on 10 October, Vice President Paz still had to sound the appropriate patriotic note. He enjoined the deputies to return to their homes to tell their "fellow citizens that the consolidation of the Republic [was] being strengthened every day, that there [were] no fears for the future of the nation or the cause of unity ... and that the valor of the army in the field [promised] a speedy and happy conclusion of the campaign against despotism."<sup>27</sup>

But it did nothing of the kind. Try as they might, the Liberals failed to find a new well of nationalism among the people. Instead, they discovered a growing insistence that while the alliance with Brazil remained good business, it was not always good politics. For the Bonaerense Autonomists, the era of glum acquiescence in Mitre's war making had ended. Now they hoped to exact a toll for every concession they offered the national government.

The Autonomists had always gauged good politics by its impact on the market. As with other Argentines, they had been angered by Paraguay's attack on Corrientes, and had adopted a pro-Brazil policy as a necessary step to setting things in their proper place. But now that the Allies had driven López back, the Autonomists explicitly sought to mold the war into a commercial venture—not



so crucial to the nation as the Atlantic wool trade, but a profitable enterprise nevertheless.<sup>28</sup> In this fashion, the Bonaerenses began to redefine their stake in the war. To be sure, they continued to evoke national dignity and pay lip service to the Triple Alliance, but in military matters they preferred that the republic recede from active leadership. Moreover, while the Bonaerenses continued to formally support President Mitre in international affairs, they had lost interest, for now, in his protracted struggle against the Paraguayans. Let the slavocrats in Brazil have their foolish campaign of vengeance—it counted for little so long as they paid for their war supplies in Buenos Aires.<sup>29</sup>

In the Argentine Litoral and Interior, many people were resentful of the course of events and some even called for rebellion. In Corrientes, Tucumán, and Santiago del Estero, local Liberals continued to support Mitre and the national government, but this was more opportunistic than ideological.<sup>30</sup> The arrangement contrasted with the skepticism of those *provincianos* who saw the Alliance as an unnatural marriage that should be annulled without further delay, and who rejected any concept of Argentine nationalism dictated by the narrow ambitions of Buenos Aires.

There were also international questions to consider. The Chileans had asserted a degree of influence in the western provinces (and Patagonia) that contradicted local Argentine interests and from which the Bonaerenses remained rather insulated. In Salta and Jujuy, moreover, a disturbing rumor held that Bolivia might soon launch an invasion in support of Paraguay.<sup>31</sup> The Bolivian president, Mariano Melgarejo, had previously shown himself partial to Paraguayan interests; at the same time, he wanted to take advantage of Argentine disunity in order to project his country's influence in the bordering provinces. At least one important newspaper in La Paz endorsed this position despite the fact that it drew undisguised scorn from the Allied countries.<sup>32</sup>

In Entre Ríos, Governor Justo José de Urquiza barely managed to restrain his associates from an open break with the national government, this in spite of the profits local *estancieros* had earned from the sale of horses and cattle to the Brazilian army. A year earlier, Bonaerense agents had tried to appease the Entrerriano draftees, and all they got for their trouble were mutinies at Basualdo and Toledo. Now, Urquiza's own wife pressed him to abandon the distasteful contacts with the empire and reclaim his rightful position of seniority vis-à-vis Mitre.<sup>33</sup>

Old "war horses" such as the Entrerriano Ricardo López Jordan and the Catamarqueño Felipe Varela urged him in the same direction. This set off scuttlebutt about the governor's intentions that reached Mitre's ears at Tuyutí. It proved most unwelcome news. The president was well aware that Urquiza could not bear to speak of the Brazilians without calling them "monkeys" (*macacos*). Mitre felt sufficiently worried about this to send his personal secretary, José M. Lafuente, to query the Entrerriano caudillo about recent events.<sup>34</sup> The resulting

report of 10 October made fascinating reading and provided Mitre with a useful appraisal of conditions in the Litoral. Lafuente observed that

the general is your loyal friend and, although the constant clamor of his entourage may gradually erode this feeling and encourage his baser passions, especially envy, when he is addressed in your name ... he forgets his worst fears, turns his back on his most odious advisors ... and returns to the straight and narrow path. ... [He longs for the] role of peace-maker; his ambition is to return to the presidency and he sees this as the ladder he must use to ascend to that position.<sup>35</sup>

Urquiza's province might remain a thorn in the side of the national government but, for the moment, he appeared dependable.

At any rate, the real obstacle to Argentine national cohesion at the end of 1866 was not in the Litoral provinces but in the far west. Curupayty had kindled a signal fire for a hodgepodge of rural interests in Cuyo and La Rioja, some of which had links with the old Federalists and the Uruguayan Blancos, and all of which resented the national government's tax regimen, its recruitment efforts, its demands for "national organization," and its alliance with Brazil. These westerners were Mitre's longtime opponents, the "barbarians" that his "civilized" Liberals had always sought to contain.

Mitre thought the westerners Luddites, a doomed breed of traditionalists insensibly rejecting the modern age and its new system of values. For their part, the Cuyanos and Riojanos detested the "odious Unitarians" of the capital city, whose masculinity they doubted and whose pretensions to national leadership they treated with derision. To these "Americanists" of the west, the principle of monarchy, whether in Brazil or elsewhere, suggested an Old World wickedness that stunk of false dignity, corruption, and more than a taint of madness.<sup>36</sup>

The rebellion that many westerners longed for finally came in November 1866, and it had the covert support of those politicians in Santiago de Chile who were still smarting from the indifference that Mitre had shown during the Chíncha Islands conflict. The Spaniards, they recalled, had bombarded Valparaíso after taking on provisions at Buenos Aires, and now the Chileans took pleasure in returning the favor by arming Mitre's opponents. The Argentine Montoneros, for their part, well understood what happens when the lamb begs the fox for aid, but greedily accepted Chilean support all the same.

"Volunteers" from the other side of the border joined with various gaucho insurgents in San Juan, after which the rebels set out to conquer Cuyo. As success followed success, the Montonero caudillos hoped to turn a limited uprising into a national revolution and to this end dispatched messages to Urquiza.<sup>37</sup> The westerners had loudly proclaimed their adherence to the 1853 Constitution as

well as their support for Marshal López. Urquiza, they knew, had an explosive personality, but now he was no longer a self-assured young rebel, but a nervous old man with dyed sideburns. He had exchanged the role of insurgent for that of livestock purveyor, and spurned the Montoneros' offer.

Even without his help, however, some three thousand rebel troops managed to seize a huge swath of western territory within just a few weeks. This encouraged the enemies of the national government in every province of the republic.<sup>38</sup> In short order, the numerous revolutionary chieftains issued a series of flowery manifestos announcing their intention to march eastward—possibly, even, to Buenos Aires. Would Urquiza stay loyal to the national government under the pressure of their victories? Only he could say.

## At the Front

Since Curupayty, Mitre had lived two months of self-pity, confusion, and persistent ague. At various times during the campaign, when all was deceptively quiet, he retired to his tent or timber-lined quarters to immerse himself in the poetry of Dante. He found it impossible, however, to free himself from the monsters the war had created. He had once shown skill in juggling political interests and beating a vulnerable enemy in the field. Now, the fighting seemed endless; the Paraguayans would never surrender, he worried, and he could find no way around the military dilemma.<sup>39</sup>

Worse still, his political rivals, both among the Argentines and the Brazilians, were ready to pounce upon his indecision. Reassuring messages from Buenos Aires could no longer hide the hard fact that everything Mitre had constructed in his own country might well disintegrate. If he wanted the Argentine republic to survive, he had to decide which adversary to face first—López, the Montonero leaders, or the various dissenters in Buenos Aires. If he chose the first, then he had to worry what the Brazilians might do and whether the Marquis of Caxias might become less a friend than a competitor.

Though no one expected a Paraguayan attack in the wake of Curupayty, the Allied commander took no chances. He ordered his troops to fortify the line from Curuzú to Tuyutí. At the former site, the Argentines evacuated, leaving the labor to the Brazilians, who built strong trenches and an earthen citadel reinforced with brick and defended by cannon. For convenience' sake, Porto Alegre lived aboard a steamer just opposite this position which offered him a degree of comfort and an ample view of the front. His men, however, led a much more cramped existence and suffered through Paraguayan barrages, which, according to Thompson, were much more successful than their own.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the bulk of the Argentine army was redeployed several miles to the southeast, where the men worked to fortify their Tuyutí position (at the Paso Gómez) with a double line of trenches and a great many Whitworth 32-pounders and

mortars. As with the Brazilian naval and land forces, the Argentines continued to fire on the Paraguayan lines with an indifferent result.

The one hope that the Allies cherished, at least for the near future, lay with Caxias, who arrived in Buenos Aires on 6 November. While lunching with his presumed friends in the Mitre government, the marquis coolly announced that the empire would send twenty thousand reinforcements before the end of the year. He observed that General Osório stood ready in Rio Grande do Sul with an additional fifteen thousand men to push into Paraguay via Encarnación if such an attack proved necessary.<sup>41</sup> This determination sounded perfect to Elizalde, who right away reported to Mitre that Caxias “was free of any nuisances that might [disrupt] the prosecution of the war.”<sup>42</sup> The Argentine president was duly impressed with this news, as he knew the men at the front would be: far better to have one meticulous and optimistic general than three bickering prima donnas.

One figure who was not so contented was Tamandaré. On the sixteenth of the month he met with Caxias in Corrientes. The marquis gave him official word that under the new arrangement, the fleet no longer operated independently under the admiral, but fell directly under Caxias’s authority. Tamandaré, unfailingly grumpy, snorted at this. The marquis contrived to soften the blow by offering his old comrade-in-arms three months’ leave in accordance with a directive from the minister of marine, after which Tamandaré might resume his important duties in Paraguay if he so chose. In making this offer, Caxias realized that the admiral could never accept it. The next day, Tamandaré dictated a letter to his superiors in Rio de Janeiro formally asking to be relieved.

On 18 November 1866, the Marquis of Caxias issued his first order of the day from Allied headquarters. He announced his assumption of command in simple terms and ordered his officers to forego wearing headgear or epaulettes that might distinguish them from their men, and thereby offer Paraguayan snipers a more tempting target.<sup>43</sup> It was a significant indication that things would be different from now on, and that all the old aristocratic twaddle could be jettisoned if it interfered with winning the war. Caxias had a facility for stripping down problems to their simplest components, and Mitre, reassured, prepared for some long and productive conversations with the new commander.

North of the line, the Paraguayans jeered: one kambá more or less made no difference to them.

## A Quandary for the Paraguayans

One might think that the triumph at Curupayty would have filled the Paraguayan troops with new confidence—and indeed, for several days, every town in the republic celebrated with games, songs, foot races for children, speeches in praise of the Marshal and the glorious cause, skyrocketes and firecrackers, and considerable drinking. Dances were held at Humaitá, where soldiers stepped lively in

their newly captured Brazilian or Argentine uniforms, their pockets bulging with loot.<sup>44</sup> Surely this meant that greater successes might follow?

Yet the tremendous achievement of Paraguayan arms only counted if the political balance in the Plata now tipped fundamentally against the Allies, and no one could be sure that this had even happened. The number of sick and wounded continued to mount and the Marshal could not replace these men.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the happy mood at Humaitá slowly dissipated into the same somber resignation that characterized the Allied soldiers on the opposite side.

Most Paraguayans scrupulously avoided any loose talk or show of disaffection, for such behavior would bring a swift punishment from López's *Acá Verá* guardsmen or the many spies in camp.<sup>46</sup> After the war, veterans claimed that even before the end of 1866 they already knew that the Allied powers would prevail. But at the time they could do nothing to stave off the unfolding disaster, nor would their notion of duty permit them any path but obedience. Their prospects of success were limited. Manpower shortages could only be alleviated by dipping still further into the shrinking adolescent population, and the increased hardship could only alienate country people; they had always led difficult lives, but they were still unaccustomed to so much outside pressure. It might prove necessary to subject both civilians and soldiers to even more coercion.

In this important sense, the Paraguayan achievement at Curupaty had a perverse effect. It confirmed López's belief that the war was a contest of wills in which the enormous material advantage of the Allies counted for little; with determination and courage, he could still win. This supposition provided a glossy veneer to the war's tragedy—for the unspoken recognition among many Paraguayans that the struggle was hopeless did not lessen the vigor of their resistance. Exceptions to this attitude existed, but they were very few.

For now, such conjecture was beside the point. Closer to the action, the men could only see what was happening in their immediate vicinity, and when actually fighting, that perspective was all they could afford. Certainly the Paraguayan soldiers had much to do at this time. The trench at Curupaty, which they had completed just hours before the assault began, was now widened and extended and the banquette raised. The men fashioned rawhide huts at the parapet's edge to keep their lines of fire unimpeded in the event of a new Allied attack. They also cut new trenches and a supply road through the woods and around the carrizal from the main fort at Curupaty all the way to Sauce—a distance of almost eighteen miles. They erected various mangrulllos and a telegraph line that linked López's headquarters at Paso Pucú with Asunción and the forward positions.<sup>47</sup> The British consul at Rosario, Thomas Hutchinson, observed that the Paraguayan telegraph system bore more than a passing resemblance to that operated by Napoleon III during his Italian campaigns. It was a *telégrafo ambulante* (mobile telegraph) made up of wires, batteries, and bamboo poles sufficient to cover a very wide circuit.<sup>48</sup>

Thompson and the other foreign engineers worked well into 1867 in designing and constructing a series of ever more elaborate defenses. Thompson himself was a phlegmatic Briton who disliked the histrionics of his Paraguayan associates—and was disliked in turn—but usually got his way since the Marshal so manifestly appreciated his efforts. In due course, the engineers finished some 12,300 yards of trenches, the majority nine feet deep, with parapets buttressed with fascines of brambles and logs of heavy lapacho. Since the batteries along the trench line were placed far apart, the soldiers packed the intervening spaces with tree trunks wrapped in ox hides to resemble cannons—a ruse that served its purpose well, for the Allied officers in charge of reconnoitering parties invariably took them for guns.<sup>49</sup>

The Paraguayans also experienced considerable problems with water seeping in from the swamp and wrecking their efforts at reinforcing the parapets. In the end, when Thompson completed the vast defensive work, he linked the two previously separated sets of trenches at Sauce and Curupayty, which now formed an immense protective rectangle over forty miles in length. The Allies dubbed this trench work the “Cuadrilátero,” and they had many opportunities to get to know it over the next two years.<sup>50</sup>

Having demonstrated his mastery of moist earth, stone, and tree branches, Thompson turned to water. His men dammed the northern channel of the Bellaco. This flooded the adjacent area, making it impassable save for movement along several wooden plank bridges that could be destroyed at a moment’s notice. They then dug a channel leading to the old trenches at Sauce, which could be flooded by means of a sluice gate.<sup>51</sup>

The Marshal understood that disguised tree trunks, torpedoes, and flooded channels could provide only minimal security for his army, so he augmented his active batteries with cannon transported from Humaitá. This brought the total number of Paraguayan guns facing the river at Curupayty to thirty-five. Two of the older 24-pounders were sent from Humaitá to the Asunción arsenal, where workers rebored and rifled them to permit the use of a 50-pound shot. These guns, too, found their way south to Curupayty.<sup>52</sup> The Ybycuí foundry produced one noteworthy artillery piece during this period. Weighing twelve tons and capable of throwing a spherical 10-inch shell some five thousand yards, it was hauled by oxen and mules to the Asunción arsenal for mounting before being added to the other guns along the river at Curupayty. Because they had cast the cannon from bells contributed from churches, the men christened it “El Cristiano.”<sup>53</sup>

The Paraguayans used these cannons to teach the Allies many lessons over the next several months. Casual observers of the artillery duels asked how López’s army remained so well stocked with powder and shot. In fact, saltpeter deposits at San Juan Nepomuceno and the headwaters of the Ypané River provided much of the raw material for the former, and the latter came mostly from

the Allies themselves.<sup>54</sup> Tamandaré's fleet, as we have seen, thought nothing of firing more than a thousand shells a day at Curupayty, and much of this spent ordnance was gathered for later use by López's men. Every armload of shell fragments that could be collected and reused earned a cup of maize as a reward.<sup>55</sup>

Only rarely did the Allies get off a lucky shot, as occurred, for example, in December 1866, when a shell hit a Paraguayan powder magazine, setting off an explosion that killed forty-six. Since this event coincided with a brief Allied bombardment against Paso Gómez, the various Paraguayan field commanders evidently expected the enemy to launch a frontal assault. It never came to pass. With the barrages doing little damage, the Paraguayans responded by blowing on rustic "cornets" made of cow horn and styled *turútutú* in imitation of the wail that they made. Their cacophonous taunts, which conveyed an unmistakable sarcasm, could be heard aboard every ship in the enemy fleet and, so it was said, drove Caxias to distraction.<sup>56</sup>

Activities on the Paraguayan side of the line focused on making that line impregnable, the better to buy time. One could easily depict the Marshal's stance as rigid in its truculence. The Allied debacle at Curupayty filled him with reassurance that his estimation of the enemy had been right all along. At the same time, López had to consider his army's strategic disposition, which had remained the same since before 22 September.

## Enter Washburn

The slow war of attrition that had now commenced was painful. The Paraguayans had to depend on shrinking material and human resources behind long extended trenches. Moreover, for all their divisions, the Allies still commanded enormous resources and with Caxias on the scene, they might also claim the political will to keep fighting. López could not cancel these facts, and he could not attack without risking another Tuyutí; indeed, he could do nothing except defend the previously established lines. It seemed, therefore, as if the Allies would strangle the country.

This assumption reinforced the need for an honorable way out. But it was doubtful that the Marshal had the imagination—or even the necessary humility—to find a diplomatic solution at this stage. López had entered the Yataity Corã negotiation somewhat warily, and had been snubbed through Argentine deceit and Brazilian hostility. He had no interest in diplomacy if it meant further dishonor.

Previously, any talk of outside mediation brought guffaws from the Allies, who had presumed that a determined assault would take them to Humaitá and then to Asunción. The Paraguayans, trusting in the justice of their cause, had speculated that outside powers—the United States, Great Britain, France, or some combination of the three—might somehow impose a peace that would



leave the Allies well short of victory.<sup>57</sup> The officials of the López government were careful not to state this openly, for such a proposition might be read as defeatism. If the foreigners could see the broad disadvantages for all concerned, surely they would insist on a new round of diplomacy. Had not something similar happened when the British brokered a peace between Brazil and Argentina in 1828?

The chief figure to argue this viewpoint was Charles Ames Washburn. Of all the people to play a central role during the Triple Alliance War, he probably felt the most frustrated by this position. The fifth son of an influential Republican family from Maine, he had always seemed a latecomer, a man of talent and introspection who watched from the side as accolades rained down on his brothers. As a favor to the family, President Lincoln named Washburn commissioner to Asunción in 1861, and subsequently upgraded his position to minister. This gave Washburn diplomatic authority. The post was no plum, however, for Paraguay was the most obscure of the South American republics, and so isolated that many responsible people in American government doubted the need for any diplomatic presence there at all.

Washburn, whatever his true opinions, reacted with verve once he arrived in the Paraguayan capital, as if to show his brothers that he was up to their standards. He even offered, in November 1864, to assist the government in Asunción in mediating the dispute between Uruguay and the empire.<sup>58</sup> Regrettably, his forthright and unambiguous behavior, which might have been common enough among the New Englanders of his day, found little sympathy in the authoritarian environment of Paraguay.

During his first stay in the country, from November 1861 to January 1865, Washburn managed to irritate both Lópezes, father and son. State officials and important figures on the social scene tended to snub Washburn in consequence. When not calling him a fool outright, they intimated that he was a man destitute of finesse who never made concessions to local sensibilities. He neither hid his opinions nor apologized for them. And for someone who took pleasure in parroting the egalitarian slogans of his faraway nation, he had the graceless habit of treating most strangers, Paraguayans and Americans alike, as his social inferiors. In a country where only one man was supreme, his attitude amounted to wanton arrogance and was deeply out of place in a diplomat.<sup>59</sup>

Now, in late 1866, in what must have seemed an irony, Washburn found himself in a situation where he might bring peace to Paraguay. While on home leave a year earlier, he had married Sallie Cleaveland, a high-strung, rather flighty woman from New York who was twenty-one years his junior. The couple spent months in Buenos Aires and Corrientes, trying to obtain Allied permission to pass through the blockade in order to reach Washburn's post upriver. Mitre seemed agreeable but Admiral Tamandaré peevishly refused to cooperate, probably not wanting to add legitimacy to the Marshal's status as head of

state any more than he had to.<sup>60</sup> Washburn fumed at all the delays, his wife droned on about the lack of proper lodgings in Corrientes, and neither made any headway with the Allied authorities.

In late October, the commander of the USS *Shamokin*, a warship on station in the Río de la Plata, received orders to provide the couple passage to Asunción, and to force the Allied blockade should the Brazilians continue to stonewall. Clearly, Washburn's family connections had finally worked their magic in Washington. US naval officers had avoided helping Washburn up to that point, seeing little advantage in offending the Argentines and Brazilians by pushing the issue of the minister's right of access to Paraguay. Now that they had received their instructions, however, the officers were determined to get the minister through to his post and out of their hands.

As it turned out, the Paraguayans already knew of Washburn's misadventures in Corrientes, and had hoped that Tamandaré would have blundered into a confrontation with the United States. When this did not occur, they met the American ship coming upriver under a flag of truce and warned that torpedoes prevented unimpeded passage above Curupayty. Washburn agreed to disembark there, and was provided conveyance to Humaitá. All along the route the minister was received with military bands and the jubilant acclamations of Paraguayan soldiers, who celebrated his "breaking" the blockade as much as the possibility of any negotiations.<sup>61</sup>

Washburn expressed surprise that no invitation was forthcoming from the Marshal at Paso Pucú, but López was sick in bed and could receive no one.<sup>62</sup> So the American proceeded to Asunción, set up his legation once again, and met with his French counterpart, Consul Emile Laurent-Cochelet. The French consul, conceivably the most polished and educated foreigner in Paraguay, reported that some districts in the country faced imminent starvation. The police had recently started arresting foreigners, and many of the British engineers who had aided the Paraguayan cause had fallen into their clutches.<sup>63</sup>

In subsequent years, Washburn would interpret this news in the worst possible way. A general decline had already begun in Paraguay, brought on by the exigencies of the war, and there was no relief in sight. As Washburn began to prepare his case for American mediation, he also tried to place a diplomatic shield in front of as many people as he could—a practice that caused him and his government considerable trouble.

An official welcome ceremony for Washburn took place in the early hours of 26 November that included speeches in favor of the United States and, with the help of various musical bands, several improvised dances.<sup>64</sup> A few days later, Foreign Minister José Berges wrote to the US minister to note his government's pleasure in welcoming Washburn's return: "I am pleased to rejoice with you that the flag of the great American republic has forced the outrageous blockade of the Triple Alliance, commanded the respect and justice it deserves, saluted

the national banner of the republic, waving in triumph over Curupayty, [and] in support of the cause of liberty that has just finally triumphed in the United States of America.”<sup>65</sup>

Berges was thinking about the long-term geopolitical implications of the Paraguayan War. In contrast to the Marshal’s other ministers, who had never left the country and who were apt to say the most exaggerated things about foreign intentions, he had a good grasp of the larger picture and favored American offers of help even if they only bought a bit of time.<sup>66</sup> His career as a diplomatist may have crested, and the Marshal had less and less use for him, but this issue of US mediation gave him a new chance to shine.

The Americans, Berges reasoned, had just finished their own Civil War, and were, at that moment, aiding the Juárez government in ousting the French interventionists from Mexico. President Grant was known to entertain a strongly pro-Mexican, and presumably pro-republican, view of continental affairs.<sup>67</sup> In the South American context, such an inclination redounded in favor of Paraguay. As the US minister in Brazil put it as early as the previous August, “we should impress all the American governments with a conviction, that it is alike their interest and their duty, to look to the United States for protection and advice; protection from European interference, and friendly counsel and advice in regard to difficulties with their neighbors.”<sup>68</sup>

As the Platine states settled down to one of the hottest summers in memory, Washburn prepared a written proposal for mediation. He probably knew that, while the State Department remained uninterested in the idea of American interference in the Paraguayan struggle, his brothers’ friends in the US Congress could be persuaded otherwise. Indeed, in mid-December, the House of Representatives passed a resolution suggesting the possibility of US mediation in both the Paraguayan conflict and the war between Spain and the Pacific republics of South America.<sup>69</sup> A circular letter to that effect was dispatched to the warring nations, and it proposed that they send plenipotentiaries to attend a conference to be held in Washington. Paraguay was asked to name one delegate, while the Allies might select one from each of their governments or one for all three. The president of the United States would appoint a presiding officer to advise and inform but not vote. All resolutions adopted at the conference had to be unanimous and ratified by the respective governments. The US president could appoint an umpire in case of disagreement. Once general propositions were accepted by all representatives, talks leading to an armistice could begin in earnest.<sup>70</sup>

The American offer was well intentioned, and, in general, well designed. It was also certain to be ignored by politicians and military commanders who had no desire for outside mediation. Washburn, unperturbed, worked on tirelessly. He drank cold yerba mate (*tereré*) from a tall glass while organizing details for

his own comprehensive offer of mediation, little supposing that the various governments involved would find polite ways to rebuff his offer.

## End-of-Year Certainties

The last days of 1866 were insufferably hot. Most men at the front did what they could to escape the blistering sun, and in the various halls of government politicians schemed to take advantage of whatever opportunities arose. With so much doubt and ambiguity in the wind, anything appeared possible. The arrival of Caxias suggested that things might soon change for the Allies. Though Mitre retained overall command, he now spent nearly as much time pondering the ramifications of the distant Montonero uprisings as he did directing the fight in Paraguay. Almost by default, the marquis saw his star rising. He still needed the Argentine president, however, and Mitre still craved a proper deference, so there was bound to be much give-and-take in their relationship.

On 3 December, word came from Rio de Janeiro that the emperor had named Tamandaré's replacement, and three weeks later the new man arrived off Itapirú, ready to take command. A sense of happy anticipation seems to have pervaded the Allied camp, with everyone, save for the admiral, assuming that things would improve. On his last day in Paraguay, Tamandaré ordered four warships upriver to shell the enemy positions at Curupaty. It was not much of a swansong, however, and although the barrage succeeded in silencing the enemy's guns for a time, it did no damage.<sup>71</sup>

Tamandaré's ultimate failure in Paraguay resulted from several factors. He was a decade older than most of the men with whom he shared command and could not help but lecture them on occasions that called for tact. He was plagued with severe bouts of rheumatism, far worse than those of Polidoro, and in the admiral's case, the pain incapacitated him on key occasions. And even when he was healthy, he could not hide his hatred of the Argentines, against whom he had fought in the 1820s. He was also prone to making exaggerated claims regarding the success of his naval units, which had proven his undoing at Curupaty. Worst of all, he was utterly unwilling to convey bad news to the emperor, even when duty required that he do so.<sup>72</sup> Pedro was far away in Rio, and could never make informed decisions on a war he insisted on winning but refused to direct. He and his advisors needed clear-cut information and loyal underlings who could act independently as the occasion required. In this, Tamandaré simply could not deliver.

The admiral steamed back to Montevideo, then to Rio, ostensibly on a three-month leave for health reasons. He made no speeches en route, no grandiloquent claims in favor of Brazilian arms. He never returned to Paraguay. Instead, after the invariable show of public acclaim in the capital, he sank insensibly into the role that the imperial system had prepared for him—that of an

aged roué who enjoyed all the pomp and dignity his rank and status merited, but who was kept isolated from real power.

The new Allied naval commander in Paraguay was Vice Admiral Joaquim José Ignácio, rumored to be everything his predecessor was not. Born in Lisbon in 1808, Ignácio came to Brazil at a tender age. Similar to Caxias, he showed a pronounced affinity for study and hard work: he learned Latin and French while a teenager and gained some knowledge of English during his various tours in Europe; he earned high marks in advanced mathematics and basic seamanship while a naval cadet, and took readily to affecting the dress and manner of a British officer.

Ignácio had a distinguished record in the Cisplatine conflict of 1825–1828. During the fight, he was captured on the high seas off Bahia Blanca. Taking an aggressive, “now-or-never” attitude, he helped raise a revolt among ninety Brazilian prisoners being ferried into Argentine confinement aboard the captured schooner *Constança*. He managed to retake the ship and escape to Brazilian-held Montevideo.<sup>73</sup>

When the war with Paraguay began in 1864, Ignácio found himself at the admiralty in Rio de Janeiro, far from the scene of bloodshed. But the conflict still touched him deeply. His son, a gifted officer, thirty-one years old, and commander of a Brazilian ironclad, was mortally wounded in the assault on Itapirú, and died aboard a hospital ship in Tamandaré’s arms. Ignácio never recovered from this blow and he adopted thereafter a Catholicism that was at once more profound and more obscurantist than that usually found among the men of his generation. This conservative and emotive faith offered him both solace and direction, but it also set him apart from other officers.

Ignácio would need all the help he could get once he got to Paraguay. The men at the front had already compared his reputation with that of his predecessor and he always came off looking better than the impetuous Tamandaré. Those who were tired of inaction trusted that Ignácio would break the impasse with a bolder approach. It had already been proven that the ironclads could stand up against the fury of the Paraguayan gunners, though as yet no one felt reassured about the river mines. Ignácio had thirty-eight warships at his command with 186 guns and 4,037 men.<sup>74</sup> He had the power and a great deal of authority; he could have taken the vote of confidence that his officers and men had given him as an inducement to move upriver, or at least to discuss the matter with Mitre and Caxias. Instead, Ignácio “marked the beginning of his reign by doubling the intensity of the bombardment.” Same tactics, same results.<sup>75</sup>

Charles Ames Washburn was not so complacent. On 20 December 1866, the secretary of state directed him and the US ministers to Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Rio de Janeiro to announce to their respective host governments that the United States was ready to offer its good offices in pursuit of a general peace. The mediation offer took the form outlined by Congress some

months earlier, its chief feature being a proposed meeting in Washington to which the belligerent powers would send plenipotentiaries. Washburn would have taken seriously his charge as prospective mediator had he known of his government's instructions, but he had in fact already left Asunción for Humaitá, having been summoned by López. The Marshal had recovered from his recent illness and was anxious to see if Washburn had any useful information.

When Washburn arrived at Paso Pucu on 22 December, he found the atmosphere tense.

Before I had left Paraguay, though the [resident Englishmen] all knew López was a tyrant capable of any atrocity, they had never supposed that they were themselves in any personal danger. But it was all changed now. They had seen that López was resolved that, if he could not continue to rule over Paraguay, no one else should, and [he] was bent on the destruction of the entire people. They early warned me to be very careful in my intercourse with him; that, if I could keep in favor with him, my presence in the country might somewhat restrain his barbarities; but that, were he to quarrel with me, it would have been infinitely better for them all had I never returned.<sup>76</sup>

Things had gotten worse at the front, and with a seemingly endless struggle facing his country, Marshal López had grown more abrupt—more apt, evidently, to cast blame on those closest to him even in tiny matters.

In his interviews with the Marshal, Washburn found the man thoughtful rather than menacing. He was willing, for example, to concede far more bravery to the Brazilian soldiers than most Paraguayans would have done at that time. It was not courage that was wanting among the *kambáes*, he maintained, but leadership, and this would not change with the arrival of Caxias and Ignácio. The situation had improved for López since the fall of Itapirú, when Tamandaré's warships had shelled his army night and day. Now, he told Washburn, the Allies would quarrel among themselves and see their alliance disintegrate, and the resulting strains to the imperial exchequer would likely force the Brazilians to give up the effort.<sup>77</sup>

As Washburn had yet to receive instructions on mediation, he confined himself to asking after six Americans imprisoned in the country. To his surprise, López ordered their release.<sup>78</sup> The Marshal also agreed to pay reparations to an American merchant whose shop Paraguayan troopers had sacked during their 1865 invasion of Corrientes.<sup>79</sup> López proved so obliging on these issues, in fact, that Washburn began to think the warnings of his English friends had little foundation. He was wrong.

After Washburn returned to Asunción, he learned that the police had arrested his landlord, don Luis Jara, evidently because of the latter's friendliness toward him.<sup>80</sup> Though he had no official leave even to protest this move, it did cause him to question the extent of the Marshal's "great politeness and civility." The foreigners in the Paraguayan capital had gone through some unexpected stress, with the police reprimanding them for their supposed lack of public enthusiasm for the war. Paraguayan women had contributed their jewelry, their labor, and their loved ones, and the men their fortunes and lives—why had these outsiders given so little?

One can sense in this pressure the hands of Lopista sycophants, who, having failed to deliver military victory to the Marshal, now wished to protect themselves by turning on anyone who betrayed an independent stance. The foreign community responded by issuing a message more militantly patriotic than that of the Asunción government: "How could we remain indifferent to all the benefits, to all the solicitude for our welfare? ... We wish to remain neutral—that is true enough. But if neutrality is meant to show a cold indifference to the benefits we have received, then we reject with indignation any [questioning of our] gratitude [to] the Paraguayan people with whom we share links of the most cordial brotherhood."<sup>81</sup> The Marshal apparently smirked at this tardy show of support, but let it go anyway. As for the foreigners, not one of them, not even Washburn or Laurent-Cochelet, could afford to take his or his family's continued safety for granted.

In spite of the growing anxiety throughout Paraguay, there was some potentially good news for Washburn. On 28 December, while still at Paso Pucú, the dispatches he had expected finally reached him under a flag of truce. They contained word of his government's offer of mediation.<sup>82</sup> This opened a new opportunity. Seeking to ascertain the opinions of the US ministers to Brazil and Argentina, Washburn proposed to go through the lines to Caxias's headquarters to learn what he could.

The New Year thus began with the barest hint of hope. In a letter to his wife, the Argentine general Juan Andrés Gelly y Obes noted that the entire army had attended mass at four thirty in the morning, followed by two long days of music, dances, and drunkenness.<sup>83</sup> The Paraguayans had just finished celebrating their own independence day less than a week earlier, singing lustily from their water-soaked trenches while the military bands played patriotic marches. Now they sang again, partly in hope, partly in frustration, partly in envy of the Allied soldiers with their full stomachs.

Eight days later Admiral Ignácio launched the most blistering attack against the Paraguayan batteries since 22 September 1866. The shells of the fleet "rained down without let-up, exploding in mid-air [above the earthworks], leaving the whole horizon of Curupaty covered with gunsmoke."<sup>84</sup> When the Allied army failed to lunge forward, General Díaz ordered his gunners to fire



back, directing all their murderous energy toward the enemy vessels. The iron-clad *Brasil* was holed by six cannonballs and withdrew quickly to Corrientes to save itself from sinking. Other ships were also hit. The Allies fired three thousand shells at Curupayty and another fifteen hundred at Sauce. The Paraguayans responded in kind. Yet again no real damage was done. On 13 January, the fleet opened a barrage on the same positions, gaining the same results. The Allied land forces probed the line near Sauce over the next few days. Once again, nothing came of it.

## The Death of General Díaz

As with many military heroes who find themselves converted into legends during their own lifetimes, it is difficult with José Eduvigis Díaz to separate the man from the legend. Born near the little village of Pirayú, he had an obscure background, and his short stint as police chief of Asunción before the war was hardly conspicuous.<sup>85</sup> His actions in combat, however, made him famous in the eyes of the common Paraguayan soldier. He was plainspoken, and he eschewed material comforts. He never slept in a bed while on campaign, preferring the simplest hammock.<sup>86</sup> He could stare the life out of a man for some infraction of the rules one moment and afterwards slap him on the back with honest friendliness and encouragement the next. In fighting he was skilled, ruthless, and unafraid of bullets, just like Osório.

Unique among the Paraguayan commanders, however, Díaz enjoyed López's absolute confidence. This might seem odd, for the Marshal's evident narcissism—the product, it seems, of an adolescence that went on too long—drove him to envy men of much lesser rank. There was something in him, however, that yearned for the heroic, and he found much in Díaz that he wanted to find in himself.

Even before the war, the Paraguayans had constructed a surprisingly modern “cult of personality” around López. Every correct decision was ascribed to his genius and every public pronouncement glorified his name; both his birthday and the day of his assumption of the presidency became public holidays, replete with fireworks and elaborate speeches. The god-like status that this cult conferred explained why the Marshal deserved a jewel-encrusted sword, a golden “wreath of victory,” a magnificently designed book of valedictories, and suffocating praise in the official press.<sup>87</sup> Actual heroics, however, remained something too plebeian, too “physical” in its implications. López had crafted himself into a superhuman entity—a beau idéal that stood above the masses—but now he had to live within its limits.

Díaz, by contrast, was “more Paraguayan than the manioc root,” and never took any interest in fancy uniforms or shows of superiority.<sup>88</sup> He always displayed unquestioning deference to the Marshal, and this was an indispensable

virtue—something that other Paraguayan commanders sometimes lacked. Even the Marshal's own brothers could not be trusted on occasions when General Díaz would willingly step forward and obey.

The favor of an absolute ruler does not always imply a want of merit in the object of patronage; without intending it, the ruler can reward a man of ability, or he might find such a man useful. Díaz had neither the independence of a Wenceslao Robles, nor the ineptitude of an Ignacio Meza or Antonio Estigarribia, all of whom López had long since dismissed as traitors. What he did have was courage and undeniable loyalty, and his actions resulted not from some servile obedience, but from a patriotic belief that the Marshal and the nation were one and the same.

Indeed, on one occasion early in the war, the Marshal asked Díaz, who at the time was only a captain, how he should go about defeating the empire, to which the man answered, "I would only wish to know your Excellency's orders in order to carry them out." When López insisted on a frank response, the future general stood as tall as his frame would allow, pursed his lips, and declared:

Well, sir, it would be the greatest honor of my life to receive your order to assemble an army of our best 7,000 men, and embarking them all upon the steamers of our fleet, make straight for the Atlantic Ocean, passing through the Río de la Plata, leaving the Brazilian ships along the coastline, where they would never sense [our presence], then enter in sight of Rio de Janeiro on the ninth day, penetrating the bay at midnight [unseen] by the enemy forts ... disembarking in thirty minutes ... crossing the city and falling [in silence] upon the palace of San Cristobal, wherein I would seize Dom Pedro and the imperial family, returning to embark my prisoners and in twenty days' time, I would present them to Your Excellency in the capital, where thereafter you would impose the peace.<sup>89</sup>

Díaz's answer, uttered quickly and with full conviction, spoke volumes about his hubris, his dedication, and his ignorance of the greater world. Marshal López could not help but love the man.

Over the next months, Díaz proved that his fierceness was more than a matter of words. Again and again, he displayed an appetite for violent scrapes with the enemy. He convinced his men that not only would they survive the combat of that particular day, but they would rid the fatherland of its enemies. This conviction had gotten him into danger more than once. In late January 1867, it would lead him to take a fatal risk.

Díaz chafed under the forced inactivity that developed along the line of military contact after Curupayty. Never one to be dilatory, he understood that

an attack en masse had little to recommend it, but was nonetheless anxious to keep the Allies guessing. Aggressive reconnaissance, hit-and-run raids, sniping, and active provocations—these were the tactics he had perfected in fulfilling the Marshal's orders and those he was most comfortable with.

General Díaz had an understandable contempt for the Brazilian navy. On the morning of 26 January, he slipped aboard a canoe and rowed from Curupaty into the main channel of the Paraguay. He intended to spy on the enemy warships and show them how little heed he took of their much-vaunted firepower. One of his paddlers, a Payaguá sergeant whom he had adopted as his godson, advised the general that they were approaching too close, but Díaz, a look of total disdain in his eye, calmly baited a fishing hook and dropped it into the water. He counted the number of enemy warships, and had a lieutenant note their disposition. Just at that moment, a Brazilian warship fired a single 13-inch shell, which burst in a flash above the canoe. The lieutenant and one of the paddlers died instantly. Díaz's godson, not realizing the extent of his wounds, managed to pull him to shore, where he saw that the unconscious general's leg was horribly mangled.

The Marshal sent at once for Dr. Frederick Skinner, who amputated the leg and told the general's friends and family to prepare for bad news. Madame Lynch arrived in Curupaty to carry Díaz back to Paso Pucú in her buggy. There he was lodged next to López's own quarters. The Marshal visited him daily and even ordered that a casket be fashioned for the severed leg, which was embalmed and placed in the room next to the general's bed. As Díaz drifted in and out of consciousness, however, he complained that he had left the job unfinished, that his men needed his help now more than ever. López tried to calm him, but it did no good.

After the surgery, Díaz could not keep his food down, which weakened him still further. On the morning of 7 February, he awoke feeling better than ever, and spoke cheerfully to his nurses and associates from the old 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He made a few disparaging jokes at the expense of the kambáes. Then, at noon, he took a bad turn. He announced his willingness to die, but loudly regretted that he would not live to see the final victory. He slipped away at 4:45 p.m.<sup>90</sup> He was thirty-four years old.

The general's death cast a pall over the entire country. Díaz received an elaborate funeral and was interred in Asunción together with what was left of his severed leg.<sup>91</sup> In the years to come, López and the propagandists of *El Semanario* inflated Díaz's reputation out of all proportion to what he had achieved. Though he was hardly the only Paraguayan to have died for his country during the war, he became the iconic representation of selfless patriotism. Even the Allies paid tribute to him.

## Exit Mitre

The Argentine president had seen his fortunes decline ever since Curupaty. His name, once associated with claims of prompt victory, was now mentioned only in the context of stalemate, lost lives, and squandered opportunities. Asunción would not fall “in three months”—indeed it was unlikely to fall in three years. At the front, as at Buenos Aires, Mitre was no longer appreciated as the farsighted statesman that in many ways he remained. His humanism was forgotten, his achievements decried. The Paraguayans laughed at him, the Brazilians could no longer contain their resentment, and his own people argued that his sun had set.

In these circumstances, Mitre kept a low profile. The arrival of Caxias had seen *de facto* command pass to the Brazilians, which was in any case reasonable, for as the number of imperial troops in Paraguay grew, those of Argentina shrunk. The Montonero uprisings in the west had brought a new threat against the national government, and while the campaign against López might wait, that against Varela could not. In mid-November 1866 Mitre detached some one thousand Argentine troops from the main Allied army in Paraguay and sent them south to join with troops being raised by the Porteños and by the Santafecinos. The officer Mitre chose to command this new army was none other than General Wenceslao Paunero, hero of the Corrientes campaign. The general's raid on the Correntino capital dramatically enhanced his reputation because it upset the Marshal's timetable so convincingly that the Paraguayans never recovered momentum. Yet talented as Paunero might have been, he could not be in two places at once, and it was hardly surprising that as these new units mustered against the Montoneros, logistical problems prevented them from coalescing into an effective force. Varela and the Cuyano rebels kept advancing.

On 24 January 1867 the Argentine president announced that four more battalions of mounted artillerymen—eleven hundred men—would be added to Paunero's units for a major push against the western rebels. “If this proves insufficient,” he wrote Vice President Paz, “then I will send from here double or triple the number, and if necessary I will go myself until the rebellion is suffocated.” In this same message, Mitre emphasized that, as a constitutional leader, he had many duties to perform and that his actions in Paraguay counted for only some of these; traitors at home had complicated his efforts, and if the uprisings in the Argentine west continued to plague the quest for national unity, he would soon steam south to crush the “anarchy of the interior.”<sup>92</sup>

On 31 January, after receiving further intelligence from Buenos Aires, Mitre announced his intention to retire together with thirty-six hundred of his fighters, all of whom would join Paunero's army. When Mitre communicated this news to Caxias, the marquis called it a dismal business. He claimed that he felt ill-prepared to command the entire Allied army in Paraguay, and could

only accept Mitre's decision if the Argentine president first prepared a detailed plan for operations against Marshal López.<sup>93</sup>

As Mitre's steamer turned downriver on 9 February, there was no longer any doubt that ultimate command among the Allies had switched definitively into the hands of Caxias and the Brazilians.<sup>94</sup> What had been *de facto* became *de jure*, and, for the foreseeable future, the four thousand Argentine troops who remained in Paraguay under General Gelly y Obes had to follow the marquis's lead.

## Cholera and Other Challenges

In conditions as terrible as those faced by soldiers on both sides of the Paraguayan War, it should come as no surprise that epidemic disease was added to the long list of calamities. Throughout 1865 and early 1866, the principal maladies were simple diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, and malaria.<sup>95</sup> Respiratory problems, fevers, trench foot, and the normal soldierly aches and pains filled out the remaining medical complaints. Now, with the dawn of another year, epidemic disease stood ready to hammer everyone at the front.

Measles, yellow fever, and smallpox had hit the Platine region before, with the last of these carrying away a substantial portion of the Paraguayan population in the mid-1840s.<sup>96</sup> Nearly twenty years later, the López government experimented with vaccination to contain any future threats. Instructional materials and smallpox vaccines were distributed to rural officials in 1862 and 1863, but it is not clear how far these programs extended or how effective they were.<sup>97</sup> They continued on an irregular basis at least through 1867, but again, it is difficult to determine how many people received treatment.<sup>98</sup> One thing is clear, however: while smallpox does occasionally appear on the roster of diseases found in Paraguayan military hospitals and in Asunción proper at the time, it never became a generalized epidemic in other parts of the country.<sup>99</sup>

This was not the case just behind the Brazilian lines in Mato Grosso. The province suffered dramatically because of the war, and even those areas far from the Paraguayan occupation experienced a wide range of troubles, not excluding measles, which appeared in a limited form in April and May 1866.<sup>100</sup> When smallpox also intruded the next year, there was no preparation and no real defense. Over half the population of Cuiabá died as a result.<sup>101</sup> It seems probable that the inhabitants of Mato Grosso suffered far more from smallpox than the Paraguayans.

The one epidemic disease to really run amok during the war was neither smallpox, nor measles, but Asiatic cholera, the worst form of infectious gastroenteritis. It had appeared in Russia in the early 1850s, leaving a million dead in its wake before moving on (via Crimea) to Western Europe, Africa, and eventually South America during the latter part of the decade. Medical authorities in the Platine states had largely contained the threat by the mid-1860s, but the

war, with its filthy conditions and countless opportunities for physical contact among men, led to a horrible new incidence of the contagion. It turned up in Rio de Janeiro in February 1867, moved up the river from Buenos Aires, and finally gained the camps at Paso de la Patria by late March.<sup>102</sup> When it arrived in Paraguay, it acted like a maniac.

Cholera works its evil in a remarkably short time, progressing from the first liquid stool to shock in four to twelve hours, with death following a day or two later. Before antibiotics, an infected person required prompt oral rehydration if he hoped to survive, and the careful disposal of waste, clothing, and bedding was essential to keep the disease in check. As it was, it coursed through the Brazilian army in a scant three days. Peasants and farm boys, crowded with other men for the first time in their lives, proved especially susceptible. Four thousand of their number fell ill at Curuzú, and of these, twenty-four hundred, including eighty-seven officers, may have died.<sup>103</sup> The disease also left a terrible mark at Tuyutí.

By the end of April thirteen thousand Brazilians were incapacitated with the disease, straining all the hospital facilities on both sides of the Paraná. There was no universally accepted treatment; allied doctors had some good ideas of how to combat the contagion and how to prevent its spreading; they distributed soap and ordered the soldiers to burn any sheets or mattresses that sick patients had used. But they also had some bad ideas. They recommended, for example, that the afflicted seek help in alcohol, which caused a run on all the beer, wine, and hard liquor the sutlers had in stock.<sup>104</sup>

The medical authorities were overwhelmed with the sheer scale of the problem, and with the fact that once an individual became ill, he stood a better-than-even chance of dying—a fact that rendered the doctors as desperate as the men.<sup>105</sup> The Brazilian officer Dionísio Cerqueira repeated the tale of one overworked physician who served aboard a hospital ship. The doctor, whenever he entered the ward, automatically prescribed *vomitórios* for patients on the left side and *purgantes* for those on the right; upon his return the next day, the order of the prescription was reversed.<sup>106</sup>

Though it is easy enough to rebuke these physicians for incompetence, in fact the doctors and orderlies who had to contend with the disease did a better job than the common soldiers charged with keeping the camps clean. In far too many cases, the improper disposal of waste contaminated the water supply, which spread the disease down the line and into the Argentine and Uruguayan ranks.<sup>107</sup> No matter how often the doctors insisted on proper sanitation, the soldiers could not grasp that clean-looking water might nonetheless harbor deadly microbes. They insisted on sharing the metallic straw (*bombilla*) with which they drank their yerba mate. Everyone suffered accordingly. Teams of soldiers were dispatched to build sheds and barns at Potrero Pirís, and these filled with cholera patients overnight.<sup>108</sup> Each day seemed worse than the preceding one.

At the outset of the epidemic, the Allied commanders tried to disguise the extent of the problem and keep its worst manifestations concealed from both the civilian population and the enemy. Newspaper correspondents were forbidden entry into the frontline camps, and the use of the word “cholera” was ruthlessly excised from all official communiqués.

The presence of cholera among the troops in Paraguay should not have been surprising, for the scourge had already struck a number of communities downriver, including Buenos Aires, where some fifteen hundred inhabitants succumbed between 3 and 25 April 1867.<sup>109</sup> The denizens of Corrientes, who had caught more than a passing glimpse of the disease’s effects, reacted with considerable alarm and threatened to burn down the Brazilian hospital rather than see such men in their midst.<sup>110</sup> In the absence of reliable information, the average civilian found it easy to imagine the worst. *La Nación Argentina* reported an unsubstantiated rumor that the epidemic had caused the remaining Argentine forces to relocate their main camp away from insalubrious Tuyutí.<sup>111</sup> Families feared for their sons, and even in France word of cholera in the Plata provided commentators with new reasons to oppose the war.<sup>112</sup>

As for Marshal López, he understood a good deal about the epidemic. Spies, who operated as laundresses and dayworkers in the Allied camp, had kept him well apprised of the increased activity in the field. These spies might have been tempted to gloat over the enemy’s predicament as offering yet another proof that God was on their side. But they had little real time for such thoughts, for in short order they, too, felt the effects of the scourge. The medical troubles at Humaitá initially paralleled those of the Allies, but this was before the onset of serious malnutrition among the Paraguayans. Most epidemic diseases are opportunistic, and generally attack individuals already weak from other illnesses, with malnutrition supplying the serious catalyst. For the Paraguayans, food and medicines were becoming hard to find.<sup>113</sup>

The Marshal faced some difficult decisions. He ordered that any contact with the men in the opposite trenches cease at once, and his pickets pulled back accordingly. He had read all about cholera during his European tour in the previous decade, and may have seen its ravages during his travels.<sup>114</sup> López’s own illness in the previous months may have made him doubly sensitive to the perception of disease, and he could not afford to discount the possibility that his entire army might be swept up in it.

The one man on the Allied side who kept his head during this difficult stage was Caxias. Aware of exactly what dangers cholera might encompass, the marquis took special care in his personal habits; he had his quarters scrubbed clean every day and limited himself to drinking bottled mineral water sent from Rio de Janeiro.<sup>115</sup> And he also lost no time in turning for organizational help to Doctor Francisco Pinheiro Guimarães, who had started his career as a naval surgeon and had already fought epidemics in Brazil.



The doctor worked quickly, isolating the known cholera cases and setting aside special wards within the hospitals to deal with the immediate threat. He strictly enforced standards for sanitation.<sup>116</sup> The town fathers at Corrientes began slowly to calm their nerves, convinced now that the threat had passed.<sup>117</sup> The same mood soon settled over the Allied camps closer to the front. Caxias, whose faith in Pinheiro Guimarães was well rewarded, called again on the doctor some weeks later, this time to go systematically through the Allied hospitals to search for malingerers, an effort that brought another twenty-five hundred men back into active duty.<sup>118</sup>

As the cholera epidemic subsided among the Allies in mid-May, it reached over the line at Paso Gómez and pounced upon the Paraguayans.<sup>119</sup> The effect was immediate. The epidemic proved worse for the Marshal's men than for those of Caxias, since the Allied soldiers at least had some access to food and modern drugs. Medical facilities on the Paraguayan side, already stretched, now had to cope with a far greater challenge. Some months earlier, engineers had erected a new hospital, located halfway between Humaitá and Paso Pucú, and its two thousand beds and hammocks filled with cholera patients virtually overnight.<sup>120</sup> Other aid stations went up in short order, as well as a dozen well-arranged huts reserved for senior officers at Paso Pucú.

The epidemic spread like an indiscriminate killer. Several of Paraguay's most noteworthy figures contracted the disease over the next weeks, but thanks to the attentions of William Stewart, the senior British doctor in the Paraguayan employ, all recovered. The afflicted included Generals Bruguez and Resquín, James Rhynd and Frederick Skinner (two of the other three British military doctors still in the Paraguayan service), and Benigno López, younger brother of the Marshal.<sup>121</sup> These men were the lucky ones, for many others perished.<sup>122</sup>

In the absence of modern medicines, the Paraguayan doctors fell back on herbs, donkey's milk, and other traditional remedies. Oddly enough, they had ice—which British engineers produced from ammonia—at their disposal.<sup>123</sup> This they used to provide cold compresses and to cool the medicinal beverages that often constituted the only relief.

Aware that the disease had spread through contaminated water, the doctors forbade their patients from drinking anything that had not been boiled. López gave orders to quarantine the afflicted men, and also to light fires to fumigate the camp with bay leaves and grass.<sup>124</sup> This left his headquarters clouded by near-constant smoke that irritated lungs and eyes yet failed to have any impact on the epidemic, which saw fifty deaths a day.<sup>125</sup>

The level-headed reaction that Caxias had displayed found some—but only *some*—resemblance in the comportment of the Marshal, who obsessively contradicted his medical personnel and interfered in many trifling ways. Following the lead of the Allied commander, he forbade the mention of the word “cholera.” It was too late to avoid panic, however, and the soldiers responded to their leader's

order by rechristening the disease *cha'í*, using the Guaraní word for “wrinkled” or “shrunkened” (which is how a suffering man’s body appeared after a day or two).<sup>126</sup>

López might be excused for his inconsistencies at this time. He was under considerable stress and was suffering himself from a weakened version of the disease, which came upon him not long after recovering from his previous illness. Cholera turned his habitual suspicions into something far more frightening. On one occasion, his fever induced an uncontrollable thirst that caused him to ignore his own rule against drinking unboiled water. With sweat pouring along his neck, he seized a pitcher and attempted to lift it to his lips. At the last moment, a medical orderly, Cirilo Solalinde, violently struck the vessel from his master’s hands, sending it crashing onto the earthen floor. This act probably saved the Marshal’s life, but his immediate response was predictably fierce. As he was on the verge of having the impertinent man arrested and shot, the bishop stepped forward and upbraided Solalinde as a cruel and stupid servant in not having permitted his master a single draft of water. This tongue-lashing satisfied López, who returned to bed without having taken a swallow and promptly forgot about the incident. Writing many years after the fact, Centurión lamented the orderly’s quick thinking and courage: in putting himself between the Marshal and a possibly fatal danger, Solalinde may have acted honorably, but in saving López he condemned the Paraguayan people to three more years of butchery.<sup>127</sup>

The fever may have sapped the Marshal’s reason and strength, but it did nothing to mitigate his stubbornness, and as he slipped in and out of consciousness, López began to perceive any number of enemies hovering near him. When he awakened, he would act on those impressions. He accused his doctors of slipping poison into his gruel, “in which charge he was seconded by the bishop.”<sup>128</sup> López had never been patient, and on numerous occasions during the war, he evinced a palpable anger whenever the day’s news went against him. His subordinates had long since learned to recoil at these shows of bad temper, which only Madame Lynch or his children seemed capable of alleviating.

López often gave in to an unbridled ferocity while in a bad temper—this much everyone recognized. In this case, however, the men around him had even more reason to tremble, for during his convalescence they witnessed a disturbing pattern that the Marshal’s detractors preferred to call madness. This it almost certainly was not, but his growing exasperation surely brought reason to worry about the future. Paranoia, like old age, can steal upon an individual by slow degrees, which, even when obvious to others, are often unacknowledged by the afflicted individual. The cholera started to subside within the Paraguayan camps by early June, but the apprehension that López might slip more and more into a world of delusion never abated. It was subsumed within the broader tragedy of the war, and by the fact that cholera had spread to the civilian population in the winter of 1867. There it would rage with renewed vigor, killing, among others, the Marshal’s one-year-old son.