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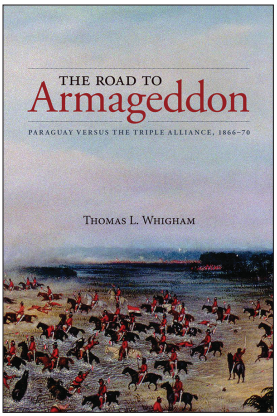

ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON
Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866–70
by Thomas L. Whigham

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8

THE COST OF ENDURANCE

By late 1867, the hopelessness of the Paraguayan position at Humaitá had become undeniable. João Manoel Mena Barreto had reinforced Tayí with artillery and placed chains across the main channel of the Río Paraguay to prevent any supplies from reaching the fortress by the usual route, and he cut the Paraguayan telegraph lines, thus making communication with the capital nearly impossible.[1] Meanwhile, Caxias and Osório strengthened the Allied lines at Tuyucué and San Solano so as to make them impervious to enemy assaults. Even Caballero's gutsy raids grew less and less frequent.

Just downriver lay Ignácio's fleet, whose warships continued to fire fitfully at Humaitá. The admiral's own supply problems came to an end when Brazilian engineers constructed a little railway line along the Chaco bank of the river. Up its tracks, the Allies shipped a daily allotment of 65 tons of munitions, fuel, and rations for the fifteen hundred men aboard Ignácio's warships.[2] Yet, the admiral refused to budge from his anchorage; he was down with fever, which made him physically listless, and he had yet to give the order to steam forward—though there was little doubt of his ability to do so whenever he chose.

This depressing reality was all too evident to the Paraguayans. A few months earlier, the men had hoped that an honorable peace might still be negotiated. Now, the soldiers resigned themselves to the fading prospect of release from the trap Caxias had set for them. The Paraguayans could not cook anything because their firewood was exhausted, along with the dried cow manure that had served as a substitute. Instead, they waited for orders and chewed ragged pieces of leather—old reins and lariats—when they could not get the charqui

and fresh beef that had once been so plentiful. These, together with the dwindling quantities of Indian corn, manioc flour, and palm hearts, now made up the greater part of their diet.

Malnourished troops could never defend the Cuadrilátero, which accordingly softened into a barrier two shades more permeable than either the Marshal or the Allied commanders cared to admit. Troop reinforcements, even if they had been able to bypass Mena Barreto along the Chaco trails, were practically nonexistent. Still further north, the latest demands of conscription made it clear that Marshal López intended to consume Paraguay's seed corn in the form of boys barely able to lift a musket.[3]

We must ask ourselves two questions. First, given all their advantages, why did the Allies not attack and finish the Paraguayans? The troops were ready, anxious for the fight, and despite the humiliating raid at Tuyutí, they had more than enough matériel to make a good go of it. Of course, they could have used more horses and mules, but this was a perennial problem, one that should not have interfered with a final assault.

However, the tension that had characterized relations between the various commanders provided the main stumbling block yet again. Mitre wanted a victory to ensure the election of Elizalde and his fellow Liberals in the upcoming presidential election; Caxias, not surprisingly, was indifferent to Mitre's partisan concerns—he had no desire to risk his units at the hottest time of the year, especially when every day he got stronger while the Marshal got weaker.[4] Besides, the Allied army had evolved into *his* army, and he preferred to wait for the arrival of more troops and pack animals, the better to forge ahead to Asunción, and to vindicate the empire's policy towards Argentina.

The second question concerned the Marshal: why did he not surrender or flee? On various occasions, he had heard rumors of a "golden" bribe that other heads of state would have accepted as a perfectly honorable way out, but had refused to discuss any such offer. He had seen thousands of his fellow Paraguayans perish, and had even lost a child in the cholera epidemic. Yet he refused to step down.

The King Of Paso Pucú

In explaining the Paraguayans' protracted resistance after 1867, it is easy to emphasize Francisco Solano López's personal obduracy, but to delve more generally into his psyche is not so easy. The Marshal's thinking does not lend itself to precise analysis. His actions, moreover, have been so consistently lauded or vilified in the polemical literature that he often appears more as a personification of good or evil than as a human being with shortcomings and idiosyncrasies. Yet because the popular will in Paraguay and the active direction of the war were so intermingled with López's mandate, it is imperative for us to understand his

mindset—more so than Mitre's or Caxias's. Above all, we need to ask what he still hoped to accomplish as the Allied army closed around Humaitá and the conflict entered its fourth year.

The time López spent at the front had amplified rather than erased his bad personal habits, and it inflated his arrogance into something approaching caricature. For example, though never regular in his diet, when he did eat, he consumed enormous quantities of beef, fish, and manioc. He made a great show of gobbling cakes and rich dainties that had been procured so as to gratify his pride rather than his stomach.[5] In matters of drink, he consumed more liquor than anyone in camp, and cared little, it seems, whether the beverage was the local *caña* or the finest Burgundy. The result of his drinking was easy to discern, for when in his cups, he leveled abuse at all those around him, screaming obscenities and insults and occasionally even sending men to be shot.

In taking the full measure of the man, however, we should admit to his points of sound thinking. He had once governed Paraguay with a mind to the future, promoting her exports and sponsoring such noteworthy innovations as a railroad, a telegraph system, and a national theater. He displayed a certain maturity in his administration that cannot be dismissed with jabs at his caprices or despotism. While many *políticos* in the region had prospered for a short time and then vanished, the Marshal remained an active force. Was this because he was lucky, or shrewd, or true to his ideals? Was his personal stance emblematic of a "gallant" nation, as *El Semanario* insisted, or was he simply an opportunist who did not know when to let go?

Perhaps the Marshal had grown too fond of his own propaganda. If so, he needed to defend these fantasies with all available resources, not the least of which was his dexterous understanding of the Paraguayan people. López regarded cunning as a virtue, not merely in politics and diplomacy, but in all human affairs. As a result, he larded his conversation with provocative statements, white lies, and monumental falsehoods. He seemed to take it for granted that his countrymen behaved in similar fashion, and even when he did not accuse them of shamming, he always thought them guilty of it. López surrounded himself with spies and toadies who offered material and rhetorical tributes to his greatness.[6] And yet, he tolerated this show of veneration only when it suited him; to do otherwise would be to invite predictability, which he would have regarded as unwise for a leader in his position.

In some ways, López behaved like Juan Manuel de Rosas, José Antonio Páez, or some other traditional caudillo who demanded absolute obedience from his semi-literate countrymen. But as a military commander with a modern, unmistakably Francophile orientation, he also despised the subservience of his fellow Paraguayans. He took pleasure in testing them, and no one could guess which mood might seize his fancy on any given day.[7]

The volatile tenor of López's administration gave rise to many tales of personal ferocity, including one that dated back to the Marshal's childhood, claiming—rather implausibly—that he took a visceral satisfaction from torturing small animals.[8] But López could show kindness, even at this exasperating stage of the war. He had real affection for children, and yet he was never shy about jostling with a favorite son over a preferred slice of beef. Toward those men who had received battle wounds he maintained an open and heartfelt tenderness, and from their pain derived every particle of vicarious glory. When in a good temper, or after a satisfying meal, he even burst out in spontaneous songs reminiscent of his earlier days in Europe.[9]

López remained an avid observer of the fighting during the months he spent at Paso Pucú. He made out the scenes of combat through his telescope, and he was always eager to hear daily reports from those who had fought the foe hand to hand.[10] In themselves, these accounts never satisfied him—not because he was losing the campaign, but because he longed to find in it something more substantial, more fulfilling. López, to put a fine point on it, wanted to be a hero. He regarded the spectacle of war as sublime, transcendental, and he thirsted for the laurels won by wielding his own sword.

Yet this aspiration, common enough in novice officers, was unattainable for the Marshal. He imagined that he could glimpse the divine spark in the bravery of his soldiers, but the more he reached out to it, the more it receded from his hands. To be sure, López might achieve some personal reaffirmation in the slaughter from seeing thousands of his men butchered, but he could never overcome his basic reservations about battle.

This dread or anxiety contrasted in general terms with the attitude shown by Allied leaders. Dom Pedro had yearned to get into the fight at Uruguaiana in 1865, but was prevented from doing so at the last moment by his ministers.[11] Both Mitre and Caxias exposed themselves to fire on more than one occasion during the war, and Flores positively reveled in battle. Only López recoiled from personal peril, and this was not a matter of him saving his life so as to save the cause—quite the contrary: whenever an Allied bombardment began, he raced for the safety of his thick-walled quarters, pushing his lieutenants to one side.[12]

From today's perspective, this trepidation makes the Marshal appear more human than those ferociously brave but somewhat wooden Paraguayan generals, such as Díaz and Elizardo Aquino. But López was a man of his own times, not of ours, and he had little interest in leaving an epitaph that underscored his humanity or emotional complexity: he preferred glory. Thus, since he had no patience for weakness in others, it followed that he felt conflicted when he discovered it in himself. Later critics portrayed the Marshal in an unambiguously negative light, as if his defects added up to something almost Satanic.[13] But these detractors have misunderstood him. What made López dangerous was

not his wickedness, but his self-doubt and feelings of guilt. These inclinations made him ignore day-to-day challenges and think instead of destiny.

The rot had already set in by late 1867. Throughout this time, López had been thinking of his place in history. To the extent that Paraguay had entered the first rank of South American states it was thanks to his father's wise administration and the son's willingness to take on the executive responsibility after Carlos Antonio López died in 1862. To deprive the country of his leadership, as the Allies demanded, would be to choose personal comfort over the national welfare.

Such an undignified course held few attractions for the Marshal, who reasoned that neither dom Pedro nor any European monarch would ever contemplate such a disgrace.[14] The proof had come from Mexico, where, in June of 1867, Maximilian von Hapsburg stood his ground when given the opportunity to abdicate. Indeed, the Austrian archduke had never wavered in his loyalty to his adopted country, and he died together with his generals at Querétaro. All of Europe had gone into mourning. López had to be willing to make a similar sacrifice in order to rouse a similar sympathy.

Though laced with theatricality and narcissism, these rationalizations colored the Marshal's attitude on all occasions, and he refused to forsake them. A political opposition capable of convincing him to steer a different course did not exist in Paraguay. The exiles in Buenos Aires and the officers of the Paraguayan Legion had acted as open collaborators with the enemy and could hope for nothing but contempt from López.[15] That left the members of his family and entourage as the only individuals who could sway him in a direction that might still offer hope.

But courtiers failed to influence the Marshal. True enough, the bastions of privilege had grown rather porous in Paraguay, a country where parvenus drenched themselves in imported perfumes and dismissed the highborn with a gleeful contempt. And the Marshal encouraged their pride in ways that his father would never have done. For example, even before the war the government sponsored popular dances, band serenades, and formal balls, not just in the Club Nacional (the haunt of the old elite), but in every public plaza as well. At some locations, separate dance floors were maintained for the different classes, but all were prodded into attending by the police, who were under orders to assure good attendance at public amusements.[16] These dances did not diminish with all the military reverses, but in fact grew, for to cancel an engagement might suggest that there was something to fear rather than celebrate in the news from the front.[17]

Those who observed that wartime promiscuities in Paraguay were not that dissimilar from those in Buenos Aires should remember that, in Argentina, social niceties were constrained by tradition, not dictatorship. The Argentine equivalents of such men as Alén, Bruguez, or Resquín could never parade their

"golden-combed" mistresses at public events and still hope to curry official favor.[18] In Paraguay, such comportment was not only possible, it was encouraged. This did not mean, of course, that every second lieutenant could gain the Marshal's ear—no one at Paso Pucú could afford to mistake his place. But since absolute rule provides its own definition for taste and good manners, in Paraguay the trend that counted was set by the presidential family, by Madame Lynch, and by López himself.

In understanding the Marshal's motivations and behavior, we might consider his overindulgent upbringing and lack of dispassionate counsel. Washburn put it best when he observed that, though López had many flatterers, he had no advisers. He had received command in his youth, and all those around him soon realized that the surest path to privilege was through adulation and flattery. Predictably, then, all heaped praise upon the Marshal until he came to regard any man who might express an opinion different from his own as an enemy. Whenever the conduct of the "war was discussed, [even] those … who had most of his confidence could never express a doubt as to what the issue might be without incurring his severest displeasure—their own safety required that they should tell him he was invincible."[19]

The members of the Marshal's family were not exempted from these rules of decorum, and they, too, had to observe a complicated etiquette. (Perhaps the old rumors suggesting his illegitimate birth had spoiled his relation with his brothers and sisters, for even if untrue, they must have been galling.)[20]

Once he was president, López brooked no familial opposition or presumption, not even from his mother. In previous years, Juana Pabla Carillo had dared to express a partiality for her youngest son Benigno, an excessively pomaded dandy who valued property over people. The resentment that this maternal predilection fostered proved long-lasting, for the adult Francisco Solano López demonstrated little warmth toward her.

López also started to regard his siblings, who had been his childhood playmates, with a marked wariness. In everyday matters, he favored the two sisters, Rafaela and Inocencia, both of whom shared his imperious humor, his cupidity, and his girth. But while they lived sumptuously and in close proximity to their mother all their lives, the sisters never got along, and enjoyed setting family members against each other. Each sister appeared to take greater pleasure in the other's flaws and misfortunes than in news of their brother's victories in the south. Certainly, they held no sway over him.[21]

Neither did the two brothers. On most occasions during the conflict the rather nondescript Venancio López exercised the post of war minister, and never once in the voluminous correspondence that passed between them did he address the president as anything other than "Excelentísimo Señor."[22] The obsequiousness did not stop there. In all formal interchanges, the members of the López family were obliged to treat Francisco Solano with fawning respect.[23]

Only one person, Eliza Lynch, seemed capable of scaling the cliff face of the Marshal's pride. Novelists have tended to treat her badly, placing her among the third-rate *horizontales de Paris*.[24] There is little fairness or accuracy in this: she was never a courtesan, though she was always controversial. She spent thirteen years with López and bore him seven children. On at least one occasion, Lynch publicly scratched his face after learning of a peccadillo, but she always pretended to forgive his inconstancy.[25] In return, he offered her trust as well as intimacy, and perhaps even loved her in a rough, unromantic way. Her support made it possible for López to enjoy something like a normal home life in the claustrophobic environment of Paso Pucú.

Whether she could ever convince him to make peace was another matter. If we are to judge by her many pregnancies, Lynch had always elicited the most powerful yearnings in the Marshal. Though he was attracted to numerous women, she was indisputably his favorite. No one else in Paraguay had her bearing, no one seemed so poised, and no one could speak French so sweetly. The grandes dames of Asunción, whose husbands lay dead at Tuyutí, had snubbed and maligned her.[26] But in her loyalty to the man whom she lovingly called "don Pancho," there was stolidity and clear thinking.

Although she enjoyed the perquisites of influence and standing, Lynch had to be a realist. In contrast to the Marshal, who displayed regal pretensions, she never fooled herself into thinking that she might one day assume a Paraguayan throne as empress.[27] Instead, she emphasized the practical side of her relationship with the president. Since the church had failed to legitimize her legal separation from her first husband—a French surgeon—she could not contract a new marriage with López; she thus needed to look after herself and their children in a manner unsanctioned by ecclesiastical law.

The easiest way to do this was through the acquisition of land. The Marshal had lavished all manner of gifts on her before the war began. Accordingly, she gained title to several homes and properties in Asunción and various parts of the nation. After the Allies had driven the Paraguayans from Curuzú, Lynch stepped up her purchase of available real estate. When she returned to South America after the war to assert claim over some of these lands, her lawyers contrived to portray her avarice as a sort of patriotism, but they made little headway with this interpretation.[28]

It is easy to see that Lynch's purchases amounted to an insurance policy in the event of catastrophe. At first, the properties she obtained were modest compared with what other members of the López family had assembled over the years.[29] At this penultimate stage of the campaign, however, she increased her holdings in a frenzied fashion, engaging in the profiteering that she pretended to disdain. Lynch came to own over three thousand square leagues in Paraguay and the occupied Mato Grosso.[30] Whether these transfers of land came through

her own initiative or through the largesse of the Marshal, it remained the case that the best guarantee of her children's security lay in upholding the status quo.

In attempting to understand Madame Lynch—or "la Madama"—perhaps the most salient observation we can make is that she truly loved López, "with all her heart and soul," and worried incessantly about their future together.[31] In another time and place her devotion to him and to their children might have sustained them both; here it only helped preserve an air of unreality. Because Lynch loved the Marshal, she petted his most dangerous assumptions, just as a loyal consort in the mid-1800s was expected to do.

Lynch may have had an "abundance of that courage of which [López himself] was so greatly in want," but she never used that courage to challenge or moderate his excesses.[32] The Victorian milieu from which she came may have permitted her to thrive as the mistress of the most powerful man in Paraguay, but it also restricted the scope of her actions; she could neither gain the respectability she craved nor afford to act independently, and she never picked up a sword or mixed in the affairs of the Paraguayan state.[33] And she failed to push him toward that comfortable European exile that would one day be her lot. Though she continued to wheedle the Marshal for small favors and enjoy his more substantial concessions, she could never afford to forget that Paraguay was his country to command, even unto the end.

Paso Poí

The final days of 1867 held only false hope for Paraguay. The Marshal reviewed new offers of mediation from Washburn, which he found wanting in substance and impossible to pursue honorably.[34] He also continued to probe the new Allied lines at Tuyucué and San Solano, setting up limited nighttime ambushes. These efforts irritated Mitre and Caxias, but, safe in the knowledge that Allied attrition would wear down the Paraguayans, they knew they could afford a few pinpricks.

In mid-November, the Allied army in Paraguay consisted of 11,587 men at Tuyutí; 19,027 at Tuyucué; 6,777 at Tayí; and 1,098 in the Chaco, for a total of 38,489 men.[35] The Marshal had less than 20,000 emaciated soldiers to counter this force. G. F. Gould, who had seen these men two months earlier, noted that many

> were worn out with exposure, fatigue, and privations. They are actually dropping down from inanition. They have been reduced for the last six months to meat alone, and that of a very inferior quality. They may once in a while get a little Indian corn, but that mandioc [*sic*], and especially salt are so very scarce, they are, I fully believe, only served out to the sick. … Many of the soldiers

> are in a state bordering on nudity, having only a piece of tanned leather round their loins, a ragged shirt, and a poncho made of vegetable fiber."[36]

Given his usual trepidation, it may seem curious that López should choose to remain with these men at Humaitá after João Manoel had fortified Tayí and isolated the fortress. But on occasion his feelings of insecurity outweighed his sense of duty, and this may have been one of those times. His men could not eat his stubbornness, however, and common sense should have dictated their withdrawal northward to the Río Tebicuary while there was still time.

Two reasons explain the Marshal's unwavering hold on his established position. For one thing, Ignácio's well-supplied fleet had yet to steam past the key Paraguayan embrasures to link up with the Allied land forces at Tayí. Perhaps the admiral thought that Humaitá would fall without much of a naval effort. Caxias had made a similar calculation on land and that gambit had yet to play itself out. The fleet commander also complained, perhaps disingenuously, that he could not force the remaining river batteries without the three monitors being built at the time in Brazil.

Then there was the surprising success of the road constructed by the Paraguayans in the Chaco, between Timbó and Monte Lindo. This road had already done good service in facilitating a small traffic in supplies from above Tayí.[37] The Marshal then erected a battery of thirty guns at Timbó and stationed a strong garrison commanded by Colonel Caballero to cover the position. López also managed to reestablish telegraph contact with Asunción by stringing a wire across the Río Paraguay, then along the same Chaco line, and back across the river, where it reconnected to the old line.[38]

The supplies coming through the Chaco only prolonged the misery of the undernourished men at Humaitá; even those soldiers who had eaten something often fell sick with gastric ailments. The cattle driven to them through the Chaco were bony animals that could find no pasture at Humaitá and had to be butchered and consumed directly upon arrival.[39] It was hard to see how the army could last much longer.

Nonetheless, López attacked. Despite the hellish heat of the day, and the knots in their stomachs, the Paraguayan soldiers managed to summon up their old élan after one of the Marshal's adjutants rode in on 22 December and presented himself before the assembled troops at Humaitá. In an appropriately thunderous voice, the famished officer (whose name was not recorded) gave the standard salute: "How goes it, boys?" (*Mbaéteipa che lo mita?*). This was answered with a loud "Just fine" (*Iporãnte*), "awaiting orders to finish off the darkies!" The adjutant, in what by now looked like a well-rehearsed stage production, responded in the same theatrical fashion, booming out "Well and good, for that is why the Marshal has sent me!"[40] He conveyed his chief's instructions

at once: the troops were to march out and destroy the Allied units at Paso Poí, a little redoubt equidistant between San Solano and Parecué.

Despite the men's enthusiasm, which under the circumstances was remarkable, the attack took two days to plan because few soldiers at Humaitá were fit for service. Once it got started, however, the raid went smoothly. One hundred sixty men moved with practiced stealth, wading through a series of waist-high lagoons after sunset, with sabers clenched between their teeth. The soldiers kept pushing ahead through the morass during the darkest hours of the night, and emerged from the water just before dawn on 25 December. They slid forward on their bellies like alligators, and just as the sun colored the eastern sky, they crawled atop the dry redoubt.

Then, in a flash, and like a horde of demons descending from the firmament, they fell upon the sleeping Voluntários. Crying "Long live Marshal López!" the Paraguayans swung hard with their sabers and cut up the four hundred men they encountered in the nearest dugouts. The Brazilians had no time to react. "Every blow was a sure mortality," Centurión wrote in his memoir, and within thirty minutes the Paraguayans had covered the position with torn and disfigured bodies. A temporary bridge previously built by Allied engineers was also covered with enemy corpses.[41] Awakened from their slumber by their comrades' startled cries, Allied infantrymen loosed a fusillade at the attackers from across the lagoon, but their bullets flew high and failed to hit a single man.

The Allied infantrymen raced away in sheer terror. A cavalry squadron whose commander attempted to gallop to the rescue met the Paraguayans in the shallow waters and received the same bowelless treatment meted out to the Voluntários. As the surviving horsemen disappeared into the distance, the Paraguayans took some forty or fifty minutes to retrieve the weapons and supplies the Brazilians had dropped in their confusion. To the Marshal's delight, they captured some regimental colors as well.

López never intended to hold Paso Poí with such a small force, and even before the Brazilians regained their composure, they had already begun to retreat through the muddy esteros to Paso Benítez. The long-faced Brazilian general José Joaquim de Andrade Neves (Baron of the Triumph) arrived on the scene at about this time, bringing with him several well-equipped units, both infantry and cavalry. The general had fought well at Potrero Ovella and in other engagements, but here the situation bewildered him. A quick scan of the field told Andrade Neves that the enemy raiders intended to regain Humaitá by the most direct overland route, so he ordered his horsemen to advance posthaste on a straight line toward the fortress, where they soon fell under cannon fire, and took still more casualties before retiring straightaway.

Caxias, who had rode in with his staff, was also thoroughly vexed by the chaos he encountered. A call to duty always gained a ringing endorsement from the marquis, but he found it exasperating to contend with the incompetence

that Paso Poí suggested. He ordered an investigation, out of which came a court-martial for the lieutenant colonel whose Voluntário units the Paraguayans had come close to obliterating.[42]

Paraguayan sources claim that Allied losses at Paso Poí exceeded eight hundred men slain against a loss of just four of the Marshal's men.[43] This obviously exaggerated number was disputed by the Allies, with the Brazilians recognizing five men lost and seventeen wounded, compared to one man killed and five wounded for the Paraguayans.[44]

25 December did double duty as both Christmas and Paraguayan Independence Day, and news of the successful assault provided the Marshal's entourage at Paso Pucú with added reason for cheer. If Paraguayan soldiers could still win a victory, even now, they might yet accomplish all that López demanded of them. The military bands at Humaitá played patriotic marches the whole night long, and in Asunción, the festivities went on for days. The Paraguayan government even took the unusual step of releasing amputees from active service at Humaitá, sending them home with fairly ample pensions—one hundred pesos each for married men, and twenty-five for the unmarried.[45]

If Paso Poí taught López that he could not only survive against Mitre and Caxias, but even win, it reinforced a blatant recognition of the need for ruthlessness among the Allies. Many Allied soldiers—perhaps most—now believed that the Paraguayans would never quit, and would continue to fight until they were annihilated; the sooner they killed all the Paraguayans, the sooner they could go home. Gone was any romantic evocation of the enemy's virtues. Instead, savage feelings of murder filled the minds of the Brazilians and Argentines, and a violent impatience filled their hearts.[46]

Exit Mitre, Again

The Argentine president made no extensive comment on the Paraguayan raid at Paso Poí; instead, he found himself scanning reports from the lower provinces, where the news was anything but good. Cholera had also hit the capital, and Mitre now had to address the possibility of a widespread epidemic. With some irritation, moreover, he read that a new "revolution," probably of Urquicista inspiration, had just erupted in Santa Fe and was at that moment threatening the city of Rosario.[47] Provincial authorities had asked for national intervention, which raised fears of another round of internal revolts.

The Santafecino uprising turned out to be trivial, but that he had to deal with it at all suggested once again that Mitre, unlike Caxias, could not afford to devote himself exclusively to the Paraguayan campaign. Elizalde, the Taboada brothers, and Marcos Paz had acted as useful political allies, but they could never do without his guidance and support. Urquiza, as usual, was capricious, and the Europeans were less willing to deal with the Liberals on anything other

than their own terms. If his army was overworked in Paraguay, the Argentine president proved even more fatigued in Buenos Aires.

Mitre had served as Allied commander for the better part of three years and, like General George McClellan in the United States, had provided the impetus in building the armed forces into something formidable and modern. He had handled the various diplomatic challenges of negotiating with the Brazilians and Uruguayans and he had succeeded in keeping the Alliance together—in itself no small feat. Although he had failed to gain his principal war objective, he had worked well with the Brazilians in formulating a strategy to bring López to his knees. The terrible setback of Curupayty, he could note, had at long last been forgotten, and the Allied army was once again on the move.

But Mitre had not yet vanquished the Marshal. Though the men at the front had heard many promises of victory as the New Year dawned, still they could perceive no sure sign of victory or peace. Humaitá had not fallen; the Paraguayan army remained active in the field (if in a less-decisive capacity); and don Bartolo's beard now had almost as much gray in it as the Marshal's. Worst of all, there was nothing to contemplate but more of the same.

On 2 January 1868, cholera took the life of Argentine vice president Marcos Paz. The fifty-four-year-old Tucumano had provided the political glue that had kept the national government together while Mitre was away at the front, and no one could replace him. Neither the Paraguayans nor the Brazilians could have wished for an event more compromising to Argentine—or at least Mitrista—interests. The president had no choice but to return south, this time for good. His wife and children were waiting for him, and he looked forward to a setting many times more comfortable than his billet at Tuyucué.

Many changes had occurred in his absence, however, and it was not clear what these new circumstances might require of him. With Paz's help, the national government had maintained a force of tens of thousands that had fought well against López, and the military had quashed opposition in the provinces, which made all the difference between a chaotic and a tranquil Argentina. Now, the generals wished to act as arbiters in a modern political order, something that Mitre hoped to forestall. There was no reason to suppose that the officers would throw their support to Elizalde, and without Paz on hand to check the Autonomist opposition, Mitre's Liberals had to look to their own.

The president could no longer waste time in pondering his historical legacy or in worrying about Humaitá, so he moved quickly, departing Paraguay on 14 January and leaving Caxias in overall command. From the Brazilian perspective, this was a key event, for the marquis could now prosecute the war according to his own dictates. For Mitre, by contrast, the departure from the front constituted a personal failure, yet another ambition thwarted by fate.

In the mid-1850s, Mitre had been the most versatile man in a generation of Argentine scholar-statesmen, and perhaps the most distinguished. Twelve

years later, he looked much older, and he had also lost the patina of distinction that had set him on roughly the same level as Alberdi, and well above Urquiza. While he still could not claim the mantle of elder statesman, his political career no longer held the same promise as it had when he was younger. There was even talk about impeaching the president for having exceeded his war powers.[48]

As it turned out, Mitre spent several months trying to keep his political work from unraveling. He lost several of his most important allies in the government, and watched grudgingly while Elizalde fell by the wayside in the presidential election, defeated by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the Argentine minister to Washington. The latter figure, who, like Paz, had lost a son at Curupayty, was an unambiguous critic of the war.

To paraphrase Nicolas Shumway, it is difficult to separate Mitre's patriotism and hopes for Argentina from his more ignoble political ambitions since he possessed such a superb rhetorical command.[49] His eloquence, unmatched either by his Brazilian allies or his Paraguayan enemies, provided a lasting veneer to a life that comprised as much prevarication as it did high-minded philosophy. Mitre's modern detractors condemn his liberalism as the product of an elitist frame of mind; his political defects, they argue, originated in his faulty instinct for humanity.[50] When he should have reached out to the Argentine people and felt compassion for their poverty, he saw in their supposed backwardness something that needed to be overcome. In that sense, his Porteño-oriented patriotism served as a cover for a new kind of exploitation. The man himself was complex, sophisticated, and attractive, but the nationalism that he so carefully manufactured in his library, in his newspaper office, and in his billet at Tuyucué, was exclusive and incomplete.

Caxias "Todo-poderoso"?

Frankly, the death of Vice President Paz had no effect on the Marshal's perception of Allied strengths because he misunderstood what had happened; for weeks he believed that it was Mitre who had died, not Paz, and he insisted that all his underlings accept this mistaken opinion.[51] Only slowly did the truth come out. López's anger did not subside on learning the facts, however, for now he suspected the men who had previously confirmed his false assertions. "The phantoms which existed in the mind of the Roman emperor," Gibbon tells us, "had a real and pernicious effect on the government." And so it was for Paraguay.

Reality, of course, could not reassure the Marshal. Mitre's departure from Paraguay left the door open for Caxias, and what had for many months been de facto at Tuyucué in short order became de jure when, on 12 January 1868, the Brazilian general took over as Allied commander. Caxias granted that his Argentine predecessor was better read and in some ways more thoughtful, but that was no reason for the marquis to act as a willing subordinate to the younger

man. His own experience in government was long and distinguished, and included two terms as president of the council (or prime minister). Even now, he was a lifetime member of the imperial senate.

Caxias knew from the beginning that the empire's status as senior partner in the Triple Alliance would provide all the power he needed. And he understood his strengths at that moment. The Argentine commander who stayed behind at Tuyucué, General Andrés Gelly y Obes, was a capable officer who could take orders. The Uruguayan contingent hardly counted. The Brazilian land forces would do their duty. And Admiral Ignácio, who owed Caxias for his show of support after the fleet went past Curupayty, could be trusted to fall in line as well.

Even now, it was not obvious that the time had arrived to crush Marshal López. Mitre's departure coincided with political crises in both Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro—the latter representing a potential threat to the Allied war effort. Radicals within the imperial government had adopted a skeptical pose toward the conflict, similar to that espoused by the Autonomists in Buenos Aires. Those members of Parliament who wished to displace Prime Minister Zacharias de Góes e Vasconcelos lent some support to this stance and censured the military for wasteful spending and poor planning.[52] These criticisms cut uncomfortably close for Caxias, threatening his command every bit as much as political shifts in Buenos Aires had hurt Mitre.

The marquis was a skilled politician who knew when to let rivals have their way and when to challenge them. He was, moreover, the leading Conservative stalwart, a statesman upon whose loyalty the emperor had always counted; not a single man of importance in the Brazilian political firmament believed that victory over the Paraguayans could be achieved without him. Now that Mitre had relinquished command, Caxias demanded unquestioned authority to get the job done.

Whatever they thought about Caxias's abilities as a general, Zacharias and his Liberal ministers had long opposed his political ambitions, and in February 1868, the marquis decided that he had had enough of their intrigues. He directed two letters to the war minister making his position transparent, and he requested leave to resign, citing reasons of health. The second missive, sent privately, enlarged on the marquis's displeasure with Liberal newspapers that had assassinated his character and undermined the success of Brazilian arms in Paraguay. If Caxias had lost the emperor's confidence—and he surely knew that he had not—then he was ready to set aside his command.

These two letters amounted to a bid for the emperor to replace Zacharías with a new Conservative ministry or else lose Caxias's services at the front. The prime minister had disliked the marquis ever since the Ferraz affair in 1866, but he could read between the lines and understand what he had to do next. On 19 February, Zacharias offered his cabinet's resignation, and, with the emperor's

approval, referred the question to the Council of State, which would have to choose between the resignation of the general and that of the cabinet.[53] Pedro seemed to understand how nervous and conflicted this made the councilors feel, but he refused to entertain any false compromises or delay—they had to make the choice required of them. They ended up by dividing almost evenly, a clear sign that the emperor should now act as he saw fit.

Dom Pedro realized that the Conservatives were unwilling to take office at once, so he persuaded Zacharias to stay on as prime minister for a short time. At the emperor's prompting, the Conservatives then composed a letter to the Allied commander to express confidence in his generalship and to ask him to remain at his post. Zacharias swallowed his pride and did the same, writing an effusive letter to reaffirm the government's commitment to the war and to praise Caxias as the one man capable of assuring victory.

The partisan crisis within the Brazilian government was not averted, merely postponed. Zacharias continued to head the government until July, but the chamber as a whole showed scant enthusiasm about his deals with the Conservatives. Dom Pedro's actions in February were controversial. He might have believed that he was loading the Brazilian ship of state with necessary ballast, but in truth he was disturbing its equilibrium (though it may be overstating things to say that he thereby weakened the monarchical system, as some have claimed).[54] The 1824 constitution granted Pedro extensive authority under its "moderating power" provisions, but the emperor had always trod carefully so as to avoid any charge of tyranny. He was not always successful, but on this occasion, he got what he wanted: the war went on and Caxias continued in command. Yet no one in the imperial government could fail to notice that the emperor's hair had already lost its previous color and that he was looking "careworn," much older than his forty-four years.[55]

The Running Of The Batteries

As far as the Allied campaign in Paraguay was concerned, the emperor's actions had the desired effect of reaffirming Caxias as commander. His conduct of the war would henceforth go unquestioned, and by mid-February 1868, the fighting had taken several positive turns. On 13 February, the three monitors built at Rio de Janeiro, which had only recently appeared on the scene, succeeded in getting past Curupayty in the dark of night. The Paraguayan batteries along the bank offered limited resistance and the newly arrived vessels linked up with Ignácio's ironclads further upriver. The monitors, having been adapted for fluvial operations, were a much-improved version of the design used four years earlier by the Union navy during the US Civil War. They boasted two separate boilers, a triple-thick hardwood hull clad with three or four inches of Muntz metal, a bronze ram, and an unusual turret.[56] Each ship came armed with a

single Whitworth cannon, either a 70- or 120-pounder, and, as with the old chatas, the hulls were almost flush with the water line. This made the vessels difficult to hit—just the thing to test the Batería Londres.

Admiral Ignácio could no longer delay a naval assault on Humaitá. Mitre had departed, and with him the old excuse that the fleet needed to stay anchored to guard against any Argentine treachery; if Brazilian warships were wrecked in an attack on the fortress, the failure would rest on the marquis's shoulders. Caxias could promise Ignácio that a major land attack against Cierva would accompany the effort on the river. The admiral had always argued that land and naval units needed to act jointly in any advance on Humaitá, and he was therefore unable to oppose a mission that featured just such an attack. The marquis not only had López where he wanted him—he had trapped his own admiral as well.

On 19 February, the two commanders set the attack in motion by having the ironclad flotilla commence a heavy bombardment of the Paraguayan positions. By prearrangement, the wooden fleet off Curuzú did the same, as did two flat-bottomed vessels that the Allies had moved into the Laguna Pirís. Simultaneously, the Allied artillery at Tuyucué shelled Espinillo, and several battalions of infantry peppered the same position with musketry.

These barrages were all diversionary. The real action occurred along the main river channel, where the fleet forced a passage of the Humaitá and Timbó batteries. In Brazilian thinking, this was in many ways the great moment of the war, something that the Allied armies had anticipated for over two years, and from which the Paraguayans should never have been able to recover.

Two hours before dawn, three of the heaviest ironclads got steam up and eased forward into the main river channel. Each had a monitor lashed to her port side, away from the fortress. First came the *Barroso*, named for the victor of the Riachuelo, leading the monitor *Rio Grande*, followed by the *Bahia* with the *Alagoas* alongside, and finally, by the *Tamandaré* leading the *Pará*. The paired vessels approached the line of embrasures at Humaitá in single file, their guns blazing away.[57] Normally, it would still have been pitch black, but Paraguayan spies had revealed Allied intentions, and López had lit a series of huge bonfires along the river. These, together with the near-constant flashes of cannon fire and Congreve rockets, illuminated the sky with a terrible light.

The Marshal's artillery units threw huge quantities of shell and canister into the air as the enemy fleet neared. Perhaps one hundred fifty guns were firing simultaneously. The din was terrific, and it lasted for over forty minutes, during which the fleet made the transit above Humaitá. Allied fire had already wrecked the river booms across which the Paraguayans had stretched three obstacles in the form of intertwined chains, and López's troops had failed to repair them in time. High water covered what was left of the chains by ten or fifteen feet, so the vessels were not long detained in front of the main guns. Even so,

Ignácio's boilers could not give his ships the power to steam ahead at anything approaching breakneck speed.

The passage was difficult, though nowhere near as hazardous as Ignácio had envisioned. Under pressure from Caxias, he had dispatched his son-in-law, the talented Commodore Delphim Carlos de Carvalho, to oversee the operation from the deck of the *Bahia*. The commodore understood what he was up against. It was common knowledge that the channel was quite narrow just below the fort—a mere seven hundred yards across; it would thus have to be approached with care. The sharp bend in the river required any ships heading upstream to lower their speed so as to maneuver against the 4-knot current. Steering problems dogged the passage, and there were times when the ships presented their full length to the enemy gunners.

López's engineers had erected their most formidable batteries just above the bend, which permitted them to pour concentrated fire onto any vessel trying to pass. The number and heavy caliber of the Paraguayan guns (some of them 68-pounders) offered an intimidating prospect, as did the various obstacles and mines that the Marshal's men had dropped into the river during the preceding months. The fire from the Batería Londres and the fortress's other guns was tremendous; it "was well-sustained and true, but the balls flew into pieces on the plates of the ironclads [and, after] passing Humaitá, they went straight on, and ran past the battery of Timbó to Tayí" where Mena Barreto was waiting.[58] In some ways, Timbó, which was located on the Chaco side of the river, presented a more striking challenge than the fortress, for it was lower and thus better protected from Allied fire. At one point the *Bahia* lost its way and collided with the *Tamandaré* and the *Pará*, which followed behind. The latter vessel took on water but none of the others were seriously damaged, and they completed the passage in good time.

Perhaps the most terrifying part of the entire episode involved the little monitor *Alagoas*, which broke loose from the bow of the *Bahia* when shrapnel cut the forward cable. The prows of the two ships began at once to drift apart. Water resistance then caused the second cable to snap at the stern, setting the *Alagoas* downstream, her bow pointed at the enemy. In due course, she neared the Paraguayan embrasures without being able to get her engines adjusted. None of the other Brazilian ships turned about to help.[59]

The danger to the *Alagoas* was grave. Having drifted into the swiftest part of the current, the ship was carried some way from the fleet, coming within a hair's breadth of destruction in front of the Batería Londres. The ship's skipper, Lieutenant Joaquim Antônio Cordovil Maurity, stayed cool during ten minutes of sustained fire, finally getting his engines into working order at the last moment. The *Alagoas* then steamed as fast as possible away from the enemy guns. Later that day, when the damage was surveyed, it turned out that the "little tortoise" had been hit 187 times.

Colonel Caballero caught sight of Maurity's ship from the low banks of the Potrero Ovella and decided to intercept her with troops placed aboard twenty canoes. The chances of doing meaningful damage to the Allies would be quadrupled if he could capture such a ship. The Paraguayans therefore pressed

> furiously ahead, [and] succeeded in boarding the monitor, but were perplexed and confounded when they saw none of the [crewmembers, who were] in the hold … and the hatchways were securely closed by heavy iron plates. Then the crew poured a withering fire from within the tower into the dense masses of Paraguayans surging over the deck, which was cleared in a brief time. Of those who managed to leap back into the boats some were killed by the fire from the tower and the others perished in the waves, when the monitor, in hot pursuit, crushed and sank the boats. The little steamer, turning now to the right and then to the left, ran down one after another of the wildly flying canoes. Only a few of them succeeded in reaching the sheltering canals where the monitor could not [or would not] pursue them.[60]

The *Alagoas* had just gotten her engines in proper working order, and, having struck the enemy canoes as they approached, proceeded to steam upriver to rejoin the other Brazilian ships at Tayí. Caballero seems to have bit into the hilt of his sword and spat as Maurity's monitor sped away to the north.

Not a single man aboard the Allied fleet was killed, and only ten were wounded in the action of 19 February. The ironclads all took hits, with the *Bahia* suffering 145 and the *Tamandaré* 170, but, as if to prove the efficacy of iron plating, none of the damage was serious. The flotilla encountered no mines, which had probably floated away in the recent rise of the river.

Under the circumstances, the many men in Allied uniform could wonder why the forcing of the batteries had seemed so easy, so predictable, and so expedient after so much time had been wasted. Perhaps Caxias and Ignácio thought the same, perhaps not.[61] Argentine critics seemed to believe that the tardy use of Brazilian naval power was part of a deliberate strategy to put the national government into the background. In any case, the old signatories to the Triple Alliance Treaty could not afford to feel very happy just yet. They were about to suffer another reverse.

The Alliance Mourns a Stalwart

A serious blow to the Alliance, if not to Allied military fortunes, came on the same day that the gunboats forced the passage of Humaitá. In circumstances that have never been fully explained, the empire's old ally, President Venancio

Flores, was murdered at midday as he emerged from his carriage in Montevideo. Unlike Mitre, Flores had seemed a man out of another age. For twenty years he had fought for a concept of Uruguayan patriotism that accentuated personal dignity and courage over national, "fusionist" ideals. As a point of honor, Flores had insisted on paying a lavish political debt to Brazil, supplying not only men and matériel in Paraguay, but in Uruguay proper, where the presence of imperial troops had proven irksome to everyone.

The president's return to Montevideo after Curupayty witnessed a few successes. But for all of these achievements, Flores failed to plug the holes within his own Colorado Party, and he never managed to recapture the authority that he had seized in 1865. Pushed into a corner by renewed factionalism, the caudillo put on his most generous face in appealing for political support. This accomplished nothing, however, and he had few friends left when, in November 1867, he rigged congressional elections one too many times. His opponents—and even some of his friends—had no intention of sanctioning the fraud, and Flores made a fatal mistake when he turned to weak-handed cronies who defended him for pay, though with little conviction.

The Brazilians had always supported Flores as the best alternative among the Uruguayans.[62] But the imperial government was no more satisfied with him than were the dissident Colorados, who now coalesced into a new faction under Gregorio "Goyo" Suárez, the victor (and to some minds, the butcher) of Paysandú. Finally, although the government had suppressed the Blanco opposition, both in Montevideo and the countryside, there seemed little doubt that these perennial adversaries would reassert a place in the country's politics at any time.

Hoping to forestall such an eventuality, Flores's sons Fortunato and Eduardo attempted to stage a coup against their more conciliatory father, who fled the city in order to rally the part of his army that was not absent in Paraguay. This effort went nowhere, and on 15 February, Flores resigned the presidency. Don Venancio may have wanted to revive his dictatorship, or work out a new deal with the Brazilians, but before he could get going with this the Blancos launched their expected rebellion.

Ex-president Bernardo Berro, a hapless combatant in almost as many civil wars as Flores, was at the center of events. Together with twenty of his most trusted Blanco partisans, he chose the early hours of 19 February to challenge the Colorados by forcing his way into government house. Each insurgent brandished a weapon and, as they tried to break down the door, cried out "Down with Brazil! Long live Oriental independence! Long live Paraguay!"[63] The Colorado forces quickly rallied, however, and seized control of the streets. Shortly thereafter, Berro fell into their hands after failing to rendezvous with a river launch sent to ferry him to safety.

This unsuccessful action sealed his fate. Flores had heard of the attack right away, but may not have learned of Berro's detention when he set out across town for a hurried meeting with supporters. En route, he was accosted by unknown assailants who blocked his path with a carriage at the sunniest moment of the day. The police never identified Flores's murderers except as dark-clad men in ponchos who ran their daggers through his body with the ease of professional killers. They might have taken their orders from the Blancos, from Suárez, or from any one of the many embryonic factions seeking power in the Uruguayan capital.[64] Given the banquet of historical vendettas on offer in the city, it was even possible that the assassins were disgruntled veterans from Paraguay or individuals with purely personal motives.[65]

The murder opened a new round of chaos. Berro, who was held at the old government house, was killed within hours of Flores, shot down together with other political detainees after having been shown his rival's body. The Colorados interred Berro's corpse in a pauper's grave after having it carried through the streets in an oxcart driven by a Florista fanatic who wailed at the shuddered windows that such a fate awaited all *salvajes*.[66] Street fighting continued for the better part of a week.

In their concern for all this disorder and butchery, Uruguayans could easily forget that their country's destiny had once seemed so inextricably linked to the Marshal and his cause. The battles of Yataí, Tuyutí, and Boquerón, the death of Palleja, even the notion of a Platine balance of power—all seemed so trifling now, so far away. Flores was dead. Berro was dead. The violence in Paraguay went on.

The Raid on Asunción

At Tuyucué, the Marquis of Caxias showed little interest in delving into the mystery of Flores's death; he had a war to wage and took to that task with ease. His deliberate movements, his slow, honeyed smile, and the contemplative look in his heavy-lidded eyes did not accord with the usual image of a vigorous personality. But he was perhaps the most vigorous man at the front.

The navy's running of the batteries at Humaitá and Timbó had opened the river, at least conditionally. Caxias could now contemplate attacking Asunción itself. The Allied land forces—just under forty thousand men—still lagged behind in the vicinity of the fortress, building up their supplies and manpower before pushing on to the mouth of the Tebicuary, the seizure of which would open a navigable waterway into the Paraguayan interior, thus offering a new avenue of advance.[67] Caxias could not afford to leave any substantial Paraguayan units in his rear, however, and so persisted in shelling the fortress with unremitting determination.

This pressure had already manifested itself on the day the ironclads forced the Humaitá batteries. With a view to confusing his adversaries, López had established a redoubt at the spot traditionally called Establecimiento de la Cierva, some two miles north at the edge of the great marsh. His soldiers defended this position with nine minor guns and a garrison of five hundred. The redoubt had no value in itself, but as the Marshal had foreseen, the Allies mistook its basic function; they seemed to assume that it guarded a previously unidentified opening into the swamps (similar to the Potrero Ovella), or else secured communication with some other Paraguayan post further upstream.[68]

In fact, it did neither. Cierva was not located at a spot that facilitated communication between Timbó and Humaitá; it was not even situated on the Paraguay River proper, as the marquis had presumed. This lack of topographical information caused him to take substantial risk in following the false lead, and, on the 19 February, he sent seven thousand men to storm the Establecimiento. According to the plan developed with Ignácio, Caxias had tried to time this assault to coincide with the forcing of the batteries. As it turned out, the attack constituted an entirely separate engagement.

Thompson's description of the battle reveals the high price paid by the Allies for their lack of clear intelligence:

> At daylight, Caxias sent his first attack, headed by the famous needle-guns. These did not do much execution, as the Paraguayans were behind parapets, and poured into the Brazilian columns such a fire of grape and canister, at close quarters, that the needle-gun men … were thrown back, and completely disbanded. Another column was immediately sent forward, [then] a third, and a fourth, [which] had no better luck than the first. While the fourth column was retreating, a Paraguayan in the re-doubt [called] out to his officer that the artillery ammunition was all finished, which encouraged the Brazilians to … return to the attack. While they were doing this, [the Paraguayans retreated] on board the *Tacuarí* and *Ygurey*, which were close at hand, and had assisted with their fire. After exchanging shots, the two steamers [fled downriver] to Humaita."[69]

The three-hour engagement cost the Brazilians some twelve hundred killed and wounded, the Paraguayans one hundred fifty.[70] There had been many heroic displays that day. The Brazilian doctor Francisco Pinheiro Guimarães, who had done so much to contain the cholera threat the previous year, found himself again as an infantry officer at Cierva, and took pleasure in personally hauling down the Paraguayan tricolor at the climax of the engagement.[71] Even so, the Allies had captured a useless position and just nine cannon.

The Marshal took no time to savor his victory, and in fact seemed to think the battle a major reverse. The running of the Humaitá batteries had left the Paraguayan communities upriver open to any assault that the enemy navy cared to mount; besides, with Delphim in control of all the waters between Humaitá and Tayí, the telegraph connection with Asunción, only recently reestablished, would be broken once again.

Though the general trajectory of such engagements as Curuzú and Second Tuyutí might call into question the Marshal's grasp of strategy, his actions on this occasion were fluid and well considered. At the very moment the ironclads steamed past the fortress, he came alive. He declared martial law throughout Paraguay and telegraphed orders to Vice President Sánchez to evacuate the Paraguayan capital and intervening communities, and to relocate both the civilian population and the government to Luque, nine miles to the northeast.[72] The few military units left in Asunción were ordered to ready their guns at the riverfront and repulse any enemy ships approaching from downstream. Meanwhile, López made ready to retreat northward across the Chaco to a point above Tayí, where he could recross to the mouth of the Tebicuary.

Sánchez was an aged bureaucrat with inky fingers who a few years earlier had dreamed of retiring quietly to his country estates. On more than one occasion, however, the war had moved him to display an unexpected energy. In this case, he signaled his immediate compliance with instructions. He notified families to take what they could carry and abandon the capital without delay. From this time forward, any civilian who wished to return to Asunción could enter the city only under escort and with the clear understanding that any visit home would be brief. The authorities also instructed diplomatic and consular personnel to join the exodus. All complied, save for US Minister Washburn; since his legation constituted sovereign American territory, he insisted he could not evacuate it without explicit instructions from Washington.[73]

Washburn's decision, predicated as it was on a faulty grasp of international law and diplomatic procedure, was poorly considered. It caused him no end of trouble later, for in standing his ground in the face of the Marshal's direct instruction, he made himself the object of mistrust. To make matters worse, foreign residents in the capital—and not a few members of the terrified local elite—attempted to seek protection within the vacant rooms of the US legation. When Washburn declined to give them aid, they persuaded him instead to store their valuables—jewelry, coins, and the like.

To this request, the minister reluctantly and recklessly assented. Though he refused to take any formal responsibility for their property, the trunks and luggage belonging to various notables of the city nonetheless piled up in his personal quarters. Even Madame Lynch sent some wooden chests.[74] So many people solicited his help that he made another ill-considered move and hired two of his countrymen to help him arrange affairs at the legation. One was

Major James Manlove, a would-be privateer who had once been a major in the Confederate Army, and the other was an obscure note taker, Porter Cornelius Bliss.[75] The Paraguayan authorities had already marked both men as suspicious, and Washburn's newfound association with them registered deep disapproval. Every move that the minister made seemed calculated to place him in a disadvantageous light.

Meanwhile, the city plunged itself into the turmoil of forced evacuation, with masses of soldiers and noncombatants clogging the roads out of town. Some Asuncenos shut everything up, hoping against hope that some of their possessions might survive. But the majority, certain that their properties were bound for destruction, left their homes wide open, with doors and windows gaping and rooms stripped bare. There was much grieving and expression of fear from nervous children, who had never before seen their mothers weep. The printing presses for *El Semanario* and wagon-loads of archival documents followed in their wake, as did a train of cattle, oxen, sheep, and dogs. Grandparents too sick to walk were strapped atop cupboards, placed onto the wagons, and carted away like sticks of furniture.

The propertied classes, or what was left of them, became like all the war's refugees—homeless, impoverished, hungry. These city people, who had always turned their noses up at the poor peasants, soon found themselves depending on those same country people for all of their sustenance, for the state could offer no succor.

Benigno López, José Berges, the garrison commander, and other members of the military and Asunción city government had already met in a hastily convened meeting in which several men voiced profound worry. Paraguayan officers knew how to obey, but they found it difficult to make decisions independent of López. In this case, as city authorities had had no communication with the Marshal, they wondered frantically what they were expected to do.

A long debate followed. Benigno (who had acted as secretary to Sánchez but otherwise held no formal position in the government) claimed to speak for his brother Venancio, the war minister, who at that moment was supposedly bed-ridden with syphilis. There were many expressions of fear and frustration, but only one man, Father Francisco Solano Espinosa, spoke in favor of continued resistance. Benigno, acting as chairman, let every man have his say and then announced his intention to ride to Paraguarí to solicit help from militia officers in the interior.[76]

He convened another meeting there on 21 February in the railroad station. Military commanders and jefes políticos from Itá, Yaguarón, Ybycuí, Carapegua, Quiindy and Caacupe attended and listened carefully while Benigno outlined the gravity of the situation. He had had no word from his elder brother, who, for all he knew, had perished or fallen prisoner. He therefore insisted that the local officials make themselves ready to receive orders from the vice president—even

if that meant making peace with the enemy. The assembled men agreed at once, less out of conviction than out of habit, and Benigno returned to the capital to report that the Paraguayan *provincianos* stood ready to obey the new orders.[77]

During his absence, several of the Asunción notables had met again and seem to have had a change of heart. Fearful of the Marshal's reaction should he learn of the unauthorized gatherings, the normally tight-lipped Sánchez cleared his throat to endorse Espinosa's words. The vice president reiterated his faith in the López family and stressed that all Paraguayans must fight the enemy in Asunción as well as Humaitá.[78] At this, the men nodded their assent in the same formulaic way that the functionaries at Paraguarí had done with Benigno. Of course, no one could have felt secure. They sank back into a posture of gloom. Outside, the rain fell in torrents.

As the US minister observed, the "long-threatened evil had now come."[79] The British engineers employed at the Asunción arsenal got word that Allied ironclads were fast approaching from the south. Their arrival was sure to unleash a furious bombardment of the city. Support for the Paraguayan cause appeared to be unraveling, and the foreign residents scurried to protect their families from whatever vengeance the Lopistas might exact at this late hour. Numerous Britons again approached Washburn, now as a group, and demanded that he place them under his protection. This time, he granted their request, insisting only that they obtain Paraguayan government approval before moving into the back rooms of the legation. Surprisingly, this was conceded, and Washburn found himself with forty-two persons under his roof.

He also inherited nine tame parrots, which he lodged on a long bamboo in the corridor and fed little slivers of manioc. One of these birds later gave rise to much apprehension in the legation, when, out of nowhere, she began to cry out, "Viva Pedro Segundo!" The minister, taken aback by this most unexpected and treasonous imprecation, glared at the parrot, who proudly turned her head to one side and again squawked "Viva Pedro Segundo!" as if she were celebrating a holiday on the Rua Ouvidor. "Wring that bird's neck directly," shouted Washburn to his secretary, "or we shall all get into trouble."[80]

Whether the minister or his avian houseguests expected Caxias's army to land in short order, many of the remaining inhabitants of Asunción believed that the hour had come. On 24 February, the ironclads *Bahia* and *Barroso* and the monitor *Rio Grande* steamed into view. The men aboard the ships glimpsed the volcanic cone of Lambaré, green and solitary, which still marks the southernmost edge of the Paraguayan capital. Just behind the hill, the river veered eastward, making a large bight that was partly sealed off by a half-sunken islet; this enclosure formed the "bay" of Asunción and within its watery limits was sufficient room for the entire imperial fleet.

Commodore Delphim remained at the opening of the bay, from which his ships began to shell the outskirts of the city. The Brazilians had already

done much damage en route, having aided the Allied army in seizing the little Paraguayan post at Laureles and in raking enemy positions at Monte Lindo and Villa Franca. The civilians at the latter community had already buried many of their sons, but they had never before heard the loud reports of enemy cannon. Now, they had the chance to accustom themselves to the sound, for as they fled their homes, they could hear the concussions behind them.

The Brazilians encountered no real opposition on their voyage upriver, just empty canoes, all of which they destroyed. They slaughtered the small herds of cattle they spied grazing near the river.[81] And they also nearly captured one of the Marshal's last remaining gunboats, the *Pirabebé*, whose crew had been caught unawares while towing a damaged schooner. The Paraguayans had to burn the ship's bulwarks for want of fuel before managing to escape upriver. Though the Brazilians claimed to have sunk the accompanying schooner, the Paraguayans appear to have destroyed it themselves rather than see it fall into enemy hands.[82]

Ignácio and the other Allied naval officers later described the raid on Asunción as a reconnaissance, but to Washburn and the other foreign observers it seemed a prelude to invasion. The one fort that opposed the flotilla was located at San Gerónimo, near the Lambaré hill, located some 275 yards from the US legation. This placement afforded a clear view for Washburn and his colleagues, who positioned themselves on the roof.

The bombardment, however, inspired no confidence in any of these foreigners, many of whom were anticipating a Paraguayan defeat. The three Brazilian vessels fired continuously for four hours, but the "shots flew far wide of their mark, the greater number fell harmlessly into the river and a few into the city, the only damage being the destruction of a balcony on the presidential palace, a slice off the front of a house, and the demolition of a couple of dogs in the market-place."[83]

The fort at San Gerónimo boasted one heavy gun, the "Criollo," which the Paraguayans had cast at the arsenal a short time earlier. The inner workings of this "raging Beelzebub" were sound enough, but the engineers had done a poor job of mounting the cannon, and the Paraguayan gunners soon gave up, having fired three or four times without getting the enemy's range. The other field guns did no better (and their shot in any case would have been "as harmless as paper pellets against the heavy plates of the ironclads").[84]

Just one small cavalry unit stood in the way of Allied success, and Washburn, Masterman, and the other foreigners expected that more Brazilian vessels would join the flotilla and mount a landing in the city proper. Nothing of the kind happened, however. Instead, the little puffs of white smoke that marked the movements of the ironclads soon dissipated into the distance; the flotilla, having fled back to Tayí, hit the undefended Monte Lindo one more time as a consolation.

Commodore Delphim's official account referred to "having severely chastised the insolence of the Paraguayans in firing upon" the flotilla, but the damage at Asunción proved negligible.[85] If the raid on the Paraguayan capital had been conceived as a reconnaissance, the ironclads should have steamed into the bay to have gained a better knowledge of what the Allies faced at the city. Presuming that the Brazilians had sufficient supplies of coal, they could also have steamed further upriver to determine if the Marshal had any reserve forces available there. If, on the other hand, the attack at Asunción was meant as a more traditional raid, then the navy missed an opportunity to wreck the urban center and sow still more confusion. Delphim's command of the river was unquestioned, and he could have returned with at least some troops to occupy the port district (though probably not the whole of the city).

As it was, Washburn could not believe his eyes. His disgust at the navy's timidity and unwillingness even to attempt a landing knew no bounds: "being as yet ignorant of the perfection to which the Brazilians had attained in the art of carrying on war without exposing themselves to danger, we could not but believe … that at any moment we might hear the guns of the returning vessels."[86] Instead, they heard nothing.

Washburn was a diplomat with a rather narrow grasp of what was happening to the south and only an amateur's judgment on the overall military situation. There were still Paraguayan troops at Humaitá, at the mouth of the Tebicuary, and in the Chaco, and the Allied commanders had yet to ascertain the strength of these garrisons. Caxias could ill afford to leave sizable units of the enemy behind him while the navy launched an uncertain operation upriver; besides, Delphim had no way to know that Asunción was essentially defenseless. He had taken fire from San Gerónimo and there could have been sizable cavalry units ready to repulse any Brazilian landings in the port district. So Delphim chose the prudent course.

Perhaps that was enough. The marquis, for his part, could recognize the advantages of at least a minor naval foray against the Marshal's capital. Word of Delphim's achievement brought celebrations throughout Brazil.[87] If Caxias could provide the emperor with solid proof of further military success, all the doubts that the Liberals had voiced would disappear like cobwebs on a sunny morning.[88]

Delphim's decision to withdraw from Asunción seemed cowardly to Washburn. But it also produced a useful psychological impact—not just in Paraguay, but also in Rio de Janeiro, where the emperor ennobled the commodore as the Baron of the Passage on the same day the ironclads raided the enemy capital. The immediate military consequences of the raid may have been limited but no one could doubt its worthiness as a gambit. The marquis had good reason to suppose that hitting Asunción, even in a limited way, might inspire a panic similar to that caused by Paunero's raid on Paraguayan-held Corrientes in May 1865. That effort had upset the timetable for the Marshal's offensive in

Argentina and ultimately brought about his retreat. This time, the Allies hoped that the entire urban population would flee, causing the Marshal's army not just to pull back, but to disintegrate altogether.

In assuming a cautious stance at the time of the raid, the Allied commander likely missed another opportunity to shorten the war. Paraguay's civilian population had indeed panicked and could never again hope to supply Humaitá; so much confusion reigned at Luque and in the hill country behind Asunción that people could not obtain sufficient food for their own needs, much less provide real support to López's army. Had they known the state of affairs, the Allies might have taken advantage of the turmoil to bring their full force to bear on the enemy. It was another opportunity lost.