



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

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# THE NATION CONSUMES ITS OWN

The Allies learned of Humaitá's evacuation ten hours after the last of Martinez's men departed. Caxias wasted no time in occupying the fortress—the object of his frustration for many months.¹ As had been true of Paso Pucú, many of his soldiers had spoken with tremendous awe for the place; everyone who put pen to paper had qualified it as vast, modern, and impregnable—a veritable Sebastopol at the edge of the South American wilderness. The primitive reality of the site must have come as a surprise, then. Indeed, Humaitá was inferior in its position and construction even to Curupayty.

The eight miles of earthworks that circled the fortress consisted of redans, curtains, and trenches sixteen feet wide and thirteen feet deep. Though part of the works dated from early in the conflict, the Marshal's engineers had never reinforced them with revetments. The parapets, sustained by trunks and interlaced palmettos, had not been maintained, either. The Paraguayans had dug the outermost line with salient angles to permit enfilade, but though the line could fit at least seventy-eight batteries, most of the guns had disappeared across the river—if they had ever been there at all.<sup>2</sup>

Of the eight batteries facing the main channel of the Paraguay, only the Batería Londres had any pretense to modernity. Casemated with brick and boasting embrasures for sixteen guns (rather than the rumored twenty-five), it had contested the passage of the Allied fleet for two years. And yet, when Richard Burton inspected it, in late August 1868, he dismissed it as a "Prince of Humbugs," eight of whose ports had been converted into workshops "because the artillerymen were in hourly dread of their caving in and crumbling down."

The Allies captured one hundred eighty guns at Humaitá, but only half were serviceable.<sup>4</sup> Some had been dragged from the deep water, while others were so old that the military men could hardly believe that such museum pieces still existed.<sup>5</sup> The Marquis of Caxias doled out the captured guns among his units, with each Allied nation receiving a portion of the spoils. The "Cristiano," which had been the pride of the Marshal's artillery, ended up in Rio's Museu Histórico Nacional. The chains that had once stretched across the river and excited so much concern were dragged from the riverbank, cut in three pieces, and delivered to representatives of the three Allied powers. The soldiers also encountered ample furniture of a rudimentary design, and, amazingly, the remaining spoils from Second Tuyutí—bottles of wine and cooking oil and jars of fruit preserves.<sup>6</sup> They found no further souvenirs save for a few broken Spencer rifles and a seemingly endless number of cannon balls.<sup>7</sup>

The battered chapel at Humaitá still stood resolutely as the most visible symbol of Paraguayan determination. The Allies treated it with almost mystical trepidation, even after Brazilian gunners had blasted away its northern belfry. In its presence, visiting soldiers requited themselves with a hushed reverence—a mood all the more appropriate given the chapel's charred appearance and smell of burnt wood. In later years, veterans bragged of having stepped through the building, much as a Victorian tourist spoke of visiting Pompeii or the pyramids of Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Yet aside from the chapel, whose silhouette later decorated Paraguayan postage stamps, the most striking thing about the former enemy camp was its emptiness.<sup>9</sup>

The fallen fortress offered pause for reflection. When the Allies departed from Tuyutí, they left behind scores of emaciated dogs, some still tied to stakes and howling jackal-like with hunger. Had these animals been present at Humaitá, the Marshal's troops would have eaten them.

If such a dilapidated and forlorn site had functioned as the linchpin of Paraguayan resistance for two years, what did its collapse signify? Humaitá may have seemed powerful as a symbol, but its reality did not astonish; its defenses may have been barely adequate, but they hardly met an engineer's definition of beautiful. Something in the appearance of the ruined fortress was disappointing and all the more poignant as a result. Officials in Rio de Janeiro could only conclude that the Marshal was on his last legs, and this inspired renewed hopes for the future. From now on, the public speeches in Allied capitals promised a prompt end to the conflict and a just punishment for López.<sup>10</sup>

But what if these prognostications were mistaken? Humaitá's sad state could just as easily suggest that the Paraguayan resistance might go on no matter where the Marshal's weakened army established its next defenses. Burton, who likened the fall of Humaitá to that of Vicksburg five years earlier, believed that the Paraguayan position was hopeless. And yet, the Paraguayan prisoners he met insisted that the war had only begun, and that none but traitors would surrender.

One of them asked the medical officer of the HMS *Linnet* why the ship was there. "To see the end of the struggle," was the reply. "Then," rejoined the man, "Ustedes han de demorar muchos años" (You will have to wait many years.)<sup>11</sup>

### A Time For Suspicion and Fear

Neither Caxias nor López had time for philosophical quandaries as they prepared for the next stage of the war. The marquis could see military advantages in the fallen fortress that neither his soldiers nor the numerous war correspondents who visited the site could appreciate. For one thing, the intact buildings offered billets, and his medical staff could adapt the hospital for their own wounded and sick. Besides, building up a strong Allied presence at Humaitá made Caballero's position at Timbó untenable, and with its elimination, Caxias's troops might take a leaf from the Marshal's book and bypass the batteries that Thompson had prepared further north.

The marquis's political position had also improved. The slow pace of the armies had seemed little better than a stalemate, and this lack of progress had not redounded to the credit of Prime Minister Zacharias. Indeed, among Brazilian politicians the slow rot of disenchantment had lately merged with a broader cynicism. The weakness of the prime minister's position in Rio, which had not improved since the parliamentary impasse of February, now provoked another crisis in which, surprisingly, Progressives and Liberals colluded. In a move that few could have predicted, they forced the emperor to name a Conservative ministry to head the government. Zacharias himself favored this ploy, as it assured his strong position in the opposition. Since the minority Conservatives could assume power only through Pedro's direct intervention, it followed that the other factions would subsequently reorganize themselves to reject the emperor's "despotism." 12

This, in fact, is what happened when the Viscount of Itaboraí assumed office on 16 July 1868. The old Liberals lost little time in hypocritically calling foul and announcing that they would embrace a series of reforms that included a streamlining of the monarch's constitutional role. Much to his surprise, Zacharias failed to gain the support he craved either from the Liberals or from dom Pedro. In paving the way for a Conservative resurgence, moreover, he helped radicalize the political dialogue in the country, which in turn sapped the strength of the Bragança monarchy over the next two decades.

In Britain, Itaboraí had claimed that "peace with Paraguay was the only rational policy for Brazil," and he declared that he "would allow himself no rest till he had secured it." At the same time, however, his ascendancy assured that Caxias's party would dominate imperial politics for some time. Itaboraí was a more cautious and guarded politician than Zacharias. The new war minister, the Baron of Muritiba, proved expert at pulling political strings to favor the

military, and he was hardly the kind of man to reject requests for aid from the marquis's headquarters in Paraguay.<sup>15</sup> This fact, coupled with the emperor's own intransigence, meant that the war would go on.

Marshal López could boast of no similar base of material support from Asunción, whose empty streets his troops patrolled in search of enemy infiltrators. The flow of supplies to the Paraguayan army had largely been stanched, and the government was now in more disarray than at any time since the López family took power. Much of the confusion derived from its precipitous flight from the capital and the faulty reestablishment of state authority at Luque. To make matters worse, cholera had returned, causing families to flee further inland or crowd into the few available homes in Luque in a hopeless scramble to escape.16 Neither food nor drink was available in quantities sufficient for the displaced population, and no one who claimed to be in charge had any answers.

López still took it for granted, however, that all upright Paraguayans were ready to accept the war's challenges as a matter of duty. According to the Marshal, whenever public spirit showed any sign of flagging, this was merely reflected the egotism of bad Paraguayans. Fear he could comprehend, and occasionally even pardon. But disaffection posed a more serious challenge—it could spread, and the Marshal understood his responsibilities even if his underlings did not. Final victory required vigilance against traitors, and he made no exceptions for those whom his lieutenants had met with in Asunción in the wake of Delphim's raid. When out of touch with Humaitá, he reasoned, these men had stolen the first opportunity to try to subvert his authority and construct an alternative power base. Their deeds—or at least their inclinations—were more sordid than those of previous traitors, and deserved speedy punishment.

López was looking for a reason to fire a shot over the heads of his functionaries. As early as 10 March, he ordered the Asunción police chief, the interim war minister, the gravely ill José Berges, and his own brother Benigno south to Seibo on the first available vessel.<sup>17</sup> It was not clear that this order amounted to an arrest warrant, but the men soon realized that it did. They also discovered the truth of rumors concerning the arrest of the state treasurer, Saturnino Bedoya, who was the Marshal's brother-in-law. He had been held for a number of months in semi-detention, but now it emerged that he had suffered through several heavy-handed interrogations and had talked effusively.<sup>18</sup>

But what had he said? When he first appeared at the fortress, Bedoya had made the unpardonable mistake of wondering aloud (during confession no less) what might come to pass in Asunción now that enemy ironclads had run the Humaitá batteries.<sup>19</sup> Bishop Manuel Antonio Palacios, who showed no regard for the sanctity of the confessional, reported these remarks to López, who decided to extract further details from Bedoya by torture. The more the soldiers thrashed the treasurer, the more ornate his descriptions became. Afterwards no Paraguayan official could feel safe, least of all the López brothers, who now could grasp the cost of fraternal rivalry.

On 16 March, while still in the Chaco, the Marshal directed a telegram to Francisco Sánchez demanding an explanation for the latter's actions in Asunción. In the note, he cited Bedoya's claims that the vice president had made himself party to a conspiracy, that in acting as the "vile instrument" of Benigno's ambitions, he had betrayed the Paraguayan cause, and had given "to the enemy for the first time an advantage that [he, the Marshal] never would have expected."<sup>20</sup>

López held off ordering the old man's arrest, and over several days, Sánchez composed an appeal for clemency that was outwardly self-effacing if inwardly frantic. He quoted back his master's own words on patriotism, disassociated himself from the "anarchic propositions" of supposed renegades, and confessed much stupidity on his own part.

Earlier, the vice president had lacked the stomach for in-fighting with other members of the Marshal's cabinet. On this occasion, though, he attacked Bedoya by name, asking "how could anyone dare charge me with treasonous acts against my government without referring to a single act, or some expression on my part that would even hint at such a probability?"<sup>21</sup> The sincerity, or the abject submissiveness, of this appeal placated the Marshal; he took no further action against Sánchez, whose long, narrow body had started to bend like a candle. The ordeal left him stooped, but alive.<sup>22</sup>

The other members of the presidential entourage took his deliverance as a hopeful sign. By wrenching Sánchez into line, López had reestablished discipline in the government. Appropriate pressure could henceforth be applied at Luque and the interior villages by his police or his guardsmen in the Acá Carayá.<sup>23</sup> Their vigilance freed López to concentrate on those areas that were his proper preserve: military preparation, the conduct of battle, and diplomacy.

Yet the Marshal's anger had not vanished—in fact, it was only just beginning to show itself. In the last months before the fall of Humaitá, López had not discarded his qualms about his brothers or the members of his staff. His outbursts of pique grew so frequent and so strident during this time that his traditional critics could be forgiven for thinking him insane. But there was another possibility suggested by the British pharmacist George Masterman, who worked together with Porter Bliss in the US legation. He observed that López had resorted to the bottle, and when not actually inebriated, commonly spent "two or three hours a day kneeling or praying" in the chapel.<sup>24</sup> His newfound faith (or reaffirmation of his old faith) may very well have been genuine, but it seems to have added to his erratic behavior, providing a veneer for something more pernicious and ultimately more costly for himself and his people.

The fear that the Marshal inspired at the Paraguayan camps was palpable during late autumn and winter. A system of espionage had operated at every

level of Paraguayan society since the colonial period, but now it flourished as never before.<sup>25</sup> López took the reports of spies in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening, and any contradiction that he detected in their testimony exacerbated his own anxiety. In contrast to the general run of men in camp, these agents provocateurs (or pyragües) never lost their tongues. In fact, they took every opportunity to make themselves indispensable to the Marshal, and the more he credited their words, the more powerful they became.

No one was safe. When Benigno arrived at Seibo in late March, he learned that his earlier display of independent thinking had been reported. In the presence of Colonel Caballero, the Marshal treated his brother with undisguised scorn. "And so," he is said to have asked, "what is it that you people were thinking of doing back at the capital?" Benigno explained his actions as if speaking to a high-ranking but misinformed patron: "Señor, since we had had no word from either you or the army since Humaitá came under siege, we believed that the time had come to save our persons and property." This statement may have had the ring of truth, but it elicited the gruffest response from the Marshal, who turned to Caballero and snarled: "See? These [blackguards] are darker than the kambáes."26

In spite of this insulting reprimand, Benigno was assigned a place that night at his brother's table next to Madame Lynch and the children, all of whom treated him affectionately as a much-loved uncle. Perhaps he thought that the worst was over. However, as soon as the army crossed the river to San Fernando, all familial warmth disappeared. Now Benigno was accused of plotting the Marshal's assassination. He was arrested and held incommunicado at a small hut where Venancio soon joined him as a prisoner. Some weeks later, Juana Pabla Carrillo came to camp to intercede for the two brothers, who by then were in irons, but her solicitude worsened rather than improved their lot.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, on 14 May, Minister Washburn visited San Fernando to ask the Marshal's leave to communicate with American naval personnel aboard the steamer Wasp, which had dropped anchor just south of the Allied blockade. As had happened in 1866, the Allies refused to permit the ship's passage upriver. Washburn stressed that the US vessel had come upriver to evacuate members of the legation and their dependents, and that, while he personally preferred to stay on, he wanted his wife and staff removed to a place of safety.

López agreed to facilitate Mrs. Washburn's departure, but could not resist asking the minister about the men and women who had found refuge at the US legation. The Marshal had already been apprised of the North American's indiscretions, how he had insisted first on staying in Asunción, then on interceding on behalf of Porter Bliss and other foreigners, and, more recently, how he had secured the release of Major Manlove, the would-be privateer.<sup>28</sup> Manlove had used some sharp words in dealing with the Asunción police, and the minister had made no subsequent effort to apologize, except in a cursory way. Such effrontery could not go unnoticed, and now, without alluding to the incident itself, López intimated that he was annoyed.<sup>29</sup>

Washburn had anticipated the upbraiding. He had already received a series of reprimands from the foreign ministry, to which he responded with an evasive correspondence. He now wished to put the matter in correct perspective.<sup>30</sup> He quietly observed that the people in his care had lived for some time under terrible stress; given the circumstances, was not their lack of courtesy or foresight forgivable? These words seemed to soothe López. Mrs. Washburn and the other dependents at the legation had failed to escape at this time, it is true, but this was due less to any obstacles placed in her way by the Marshal than because of Caxias's attitude toward Captain William Kirkland, commander of the *Wasp*, who had wanted to steam north in the face of Brazilian refusal to cooperate.

Washburn had already observed that day-to-day life had grown more precarious at the front, such that those stationed at San Fernando had taken to greeting each other with foreboding in their voices. He noticed that his friends among the British engineers avoided his gaze. Even the gregarious Thompson let him know that he should not speak too openly about Paraguay's quest for an honorable peace. The minister returned to Asunción two days later rather more perplexed than reassured.<sup>31</sup> During his last night in camp, he had joined Thompson, Franz Wisner von Morgenstern, and Madame Lynch for a game of whist, but the camaraderie typical of these parties was missing. The players sent their greetings to Mrs. Washburn but otherwise kept their voices low and their eyes firmly fixed on their cards.

### The "Tribunals of Blood"

Washburn wondered what all this awkwardness portended. He had long since grown accustomed to the authoritarian vagaries of Paraguay, but the hesitancy that he witnessed among his fellow card players betrayed a sense of anxiety far more pointed than what he expected to find among such privileged individuals. Things had in fact grown far worse than Washburn could have realized. Bedoya had evidently died of dysentery on 17 May, and therefore could no longer add—or invent—details to the tale of revolutionary plotting. But its general parameters had nonetheless started to take shape in the Marshal's mind, and López placed the US minister at the center of this fantastic scheme.

In his memoirs, General Francisco Isidoro Resquín summarized the official version of what had happened. He claimed that Washburn had first connived with the Marquis of Caxias on one of his visits to the Allied camp in late 1866, and that the two men had been biding their time until they could enlist some powerful coconspirators. At length they were approached by Bedoya, who presented the minister with a quantity of gold pilfered from the Paraguayan treasury. To this bribe was supposedly added monies from Benigno, from the

imperial coffers, and from the property stored within the US legation. As the enemy closed in on Humaitá, this cash became more central in the thinking of the plotters. Foreign Minister Berges, General Barrios, Monsignor Palacios, and the two López brothers eventually joined with Washburn, who, Resquín argued, sought to coordinate an uprising to coincide with Delphim's attack on Asunción.

When the commodore failed to occupy the capital, however, the rebellion was rescheduled for July, or whenever the Brazilians could overwhelm the Paraguayan batteries on the Tebicuary. Timing was crucial in the convoluted account, but the traitors supposedly felt optimistic. The Marshal's spies even purportedly intercepted a letter from Benigno to Caxias that outlined the details of the plan and presented incriminating evidence against more than eighty suspects.<sup>33</sup>

On the surface, this claim of conspiracy amounted to a pastiche of poorly digested information derived from unreliable informants, blended with the Marshal's preexisting fears, and presented as self-justification by the officer responsible for the mistreatment of the accused. The different elements in the account certainly compel our attention, but they hang together poorly. For one thing, though Washburn made little secret of his aversion to López, he had no more sympathy for Caxias, Benigno, and all the others who had purportedly lent their support to the plot.<sup>34</sup> The accused Paraguayans, moreover, lived in glass houses and knew from experience that their most innocent remarks were always reported to the police. They might very well share Washburn's distaste for the Marshal's politics, but they would have found it impossible to unite with the US minister in any revolutionary committee. Even the theory that Washburn provided indirect aid for their efforts (and eschewed a central role for himself) was ruled out by the fact that the man could never keep his mouth shut.

Both in his memoirs and in formal testimony before the US Congress in 1870, Washburn denied that he had ever conspired against the government to which he had been accredited.<sup>35</sup> He maintained then and for the rest of his life that his efforts at mediation between Paraguay and the Allies had been disinterested, and that his actions at the legation, as well as his later defense of resident foreigners, were fully consistent with proper diplomatic practice. It seems unlikely that European diplomatists in the Platine countries could have endorsed this interpretation, and even many of his own North American colleagues regarded the New Englander as a hothead.<sup>36</sup> Conspirators are rarely fashioned from among the indiscreet.

Nonetheless, many doubts hovered around the US minister, and, even today, some polemicists point a finger in his direction.<sup>37</sup> Two diametrically opposed views have developed in the historical literature to explain Washburn's conduct in Paraguay. Those who supported him in print during his lifetime had repeatedly fallen victim to the Marshal's excesses, and, though they thought the minister brash, they still owed their lives to his intercession.<sup>38</sup> Those who insisted on his complicity in a plot, by contrast, often had a great deal to conceal about their own comportment during the war.<sup>39</sup> If they could tie the country's downfall to foreign imperialists and local backstabbers, then perhaps they might secure their own reputation in years to come.

Amid this rat's nest of blame and counter blame, what we can clearly see is that the one man whose opinion mattered in May and June of 1868—Marshal Francisco Solano López—had yet to make up his mind about Washburn. López certainly harbored serious concerns about the US minister's capacity for intrigue, but he was similarly suspicious about the other foreign representatives. Benigno, Venancio, and the others he had already marked down as undependable, but he was unsure of what to do with them.

July saw another incident that helped corroborate the Marshal's worst fears. On 24 July—López's birthday—three imperial monitors struck at the batteries that Thompson had established at the mouth of the Tebicuary. It was not much of an engagement, and it interfered little with the celebrations on land. The Allied vessels managed to score several hits on positions south of San Fernando, but the Paraguayan gunners drove them off successfully.

In his account of the day's events, Thompson reported that, as the monitors steamed past, three individuals put their heads out of the turret of the Bahia, and one shouted at the Paraguayan soldiers who glared at them from the riverbank. As the British engineer noted, the moment they went by,

I telegraphed to López the number which had passed, and proceeded to write another dispatch containing details, when I received a telegram from him saying, "what signal did the first ironclad make on passing the battery?" The telegraph clerk had already informed him. I then wrote and told him all about it, and that the men said it was the Paraguayan Recalde, who had formerly deserted from López. Hereupon he wrote me a terrible anathema against traitors, wondering that they had been allowed to pass in silence, and to open their polluted mouths to honest patriots. ... I wrote back that they had been well abused by all, which was a fact; he then wrote back that he was now "satisfied with my explanation." [But] he absolutely held me responsible for Recalde putting his head out of the turret of the ironclad.40

It seems that the Marshal had come to doubt the loyalty of his long-serving British subordinate. He also seemed to think it probable that turncoats in the pay of the marquis were communicating with men in his own army. This could only mean that the culmination of the treasonable plotting was at hand.

López moved swiftly. On 2 August, he issued a decree that invoked the Laws of the Indies in establishing a series of two-man tribunals to investigate accusations of treason.<sup>41</sup> *Jueces fiscales* (or judge-prosecutors) were chosen from among clerics and those officers the Marshal still considered reliable. He designated the bull-necked General Resquín as chief officer responsible for arraigning the defendants and carrying out whatever sentences the special courts determined. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of suspects were taken into custody, and the podgy Resquín, who was now drinking and eating almost as much as López, lost no time in arguing that they receive a severe grilling.

Arrests had already taken place further north. Former foreign minister Berges was detained at his country estate in Salinares, as was the Bolivian writer Tristan Roca, editor of *El Centinela*, in Areguá.<sup>42</sup> The two López sisters were also arrested, as was Gustave Bayon de Libertat, the assistant of French consul Paul Cuverville, and José María Leite Pereira, the honorary consul of Portugal.<sup>43</sup> Almost all the jueces de paz, jefes políticos, and militia commanders in the central zone from San Lorenzo to Villarrica—two hundred individuals in all—were detained and then concentrated in Luque. Most were eventually brought south to San Fernando by steamer.<sup>44</sup>

Prisoners of both sexes arrived in camp daily. The imprisoned women, nearly all of them members of the upper class, enjoyed the privilege of remaining unshackled. Each received a cured hide for a bed. Otherwise, they had to make do in the open air the same as the men and consume the same miserable fare of unsalted beef in portions smaller than those doled out to soldiers. Once a day the prisoners received a cow horn of water from the nearby lagoon. Given the reluctance of the guards to escort them from their place of confinement, the accused men and women often had to squat in their own filth. All prisoners were chained at night, where they sat "in rows, stretched on the damp, slimy ground." Thus assembled, these "conspirators," already thin, declined rapidly.

The surrender of the Humaitá garrison came three days before the trials began. That event cast a noticeable pall over the proceedings at San Fernando and ushered in the Marshal's most egregious and controversial demonstration of ruthlessness. The gallant Colonel Martínez, whose long service and unshaken loyalty were soon forgotten, had joined his starving men in Allied captivity, and was now beyond López's reach. His round-faced young wife, Juliana Ynsfrán, had been evacuated to the Paraguayan interior, however, and her fate was different.

Doña Juliana was first cousin to the Marshal, one of the privileged members of the presidential family. She had resided at Madame Lynch's country house at Patiño Cue for several months. Then, one night in August, two soldiers appeared at her door, rapping melodramatically and demanding that she present herself for arrest. No sooner had she dressed when they seized her, taking her torn and disheveled to Asunción. At mid-morning, she met another party

of soldiers at the arsenal, who loaded her with heavy fetters, and dragged her aboard a steamer bound for San Fernando, where she joined the growing ranks of the accused.<sup>46</sup>

The witch-hunt began in earnest. The two-man judicial teams received instructions to scour the entire country for possible traitors, and if we are inclined to doubt the efficacy of the Paraguayan government in delivering foodstuffs and in containing the threat from epidemic disease, we can be sure the state did an exemplary, if terrifying, job conducting the so-called tribunals of blood.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Mitre, who during the Montonero rebellions usually placed rebels before the firing squad without trial, the Marshal observed the legal conventions at San Fernando. So did his associates, who interpreted the letter of the law with unmistakable strictness.

The most remarkable of the *fiscales* to emerge from the tribunals of blood was Fidel Maíz, a tall, clear-eyed, forty-year-old priest from the tiny hamlet of Arroyos y Esteros. With a surname that evoked images of the countryside, Maíz had a good claim on being the most cultured Paraguayan of his generation. He earned lavish praise from his contemporaries for his scholarship, oratorical skills, and piety, and he occasionally dabbled in poetry, geography, and the sciences as well as theology. Despite the isolation of Maíz's home parish, he strove to maintain close relations with the lettered portion of the Paraguayan elite, not excluding members of the presidential family.

Unfortunately for Father Maíz, there were those who envied his reputation and way with words. As a result, in 1862 he was arrested, fitted with irons and left to languish in military custody for nearly five years. <sup>49</sup> During that time he learned that he was little suited to the role of martyr. Nor did he relish being insulated from the tremendous challenges that his country had endured during his captivity. Eight of his ten brothers perished during the war. The Allied armies crossed the Paraná and pummeled his country at Tuyutí and Boquerón, and still he remained a prisoner, unable to come to her defense or improve his own condition.

The victory at Curupayty put Marshal López in a generous frame of mind and this, in turn, saved Maíz. Instead of facing the firing squad, he sought the intercession of the Marshal's patron saint and composed a petition for clemency. This fulsome and unctuous appeal, which appeared in *El Semanario*, was a model of blasphemous adulation, in which Maíz compared López to Jesus Christ—indeed, to the latter's disadvantage.<sup>50</sup> Any reader who lived outside Paraguay during the 1860s would have thought the petition a nauseating joke. Its publication, however, earned the cleric his freedom, and afterwards he worked on *Cabichuí* and served as chaplain to the men in López's guard.<sup>51</sup>

No one can doubt Father Maíz's brilliance as a writer and orator who spoke an incomparably fluent Guaraní. But for a man of the cloth to oversee the torture and execution of accused traitors requires explanation. On the one hand, his deeds at San Fernando were distinctly Faustian. Having for so long cringed in pain in the Marshal's jails, he now looked for every chance to redeem himself in López's eyes. At the same time, he could not fail to notice that the Paraguay of 1868 no longer reflected the static norms of the world into which he had been born. The Guaraní-speaking peasants of the interior—the land of his youth had lately gained an ascendancy, even strength, in the service of Marshal López. Through them, Maíz perceived some residual hope for influence. He calculated that persecution of the established elite would reinforce the national sympathy that the Marshal sought to stir. In flogging the upper classes, the government might draw attention to the contrasting loyalty of the country people, over whom Maíz could claim some sway.52

Maíz's status as a cleric helps to explain this reasoning. He recognized a common thread between the social status of his peasant parishioners and the message of the Gospels that proclaimed the good news not just for the upper classes, but for all people. If his labors at San Fernando could suppress the ignoble ambitions of the elites—and separate them from their foreign baals—this would also promote the wider interests of Paraguayan Christianity.

We might speculate that whenever this religious imperative failed him, Maíz could also take refuge in the contradictions of politics. Having taken a "liberal" posture in the past, he could help foster the future welfare of Paraguay only by assuming an authoritarian stance in the present. This hope required a somersault in thinking, but it allowed him to qualify his actions as necessary, even commendable. 53 Whether he cloaked himself in an all-encompassing Catholic faith, or in an equally powerful nationalism, Maíz intended to do his conscientious duty as a fiscal.

There was much self-deception in all this, but Maíz was not alone in seeking to make the ends justify the means at San Fernando. There were many other willing collaborators. Juan Crisóstomo Centurión, the handsome staff officer who had overseen the "scientific" restructuring of Guaraní orthography and who left to posterity one of the most detailed memoirs of the war, himself barely missed being accused of plotting, and responded to this close call by joining the crusade against the internal enemy.<sup>54</sup> So did Colonel Silvestre Aveiro, the former private secretary of Carlos Antonio López; José Falcón, the sometime director of the National Archive; and Justo Román, another army chaplain with long experience at the altar.<sup>55</sup>

All five of these men were thoughtful, well-read individuals whose submission to the Marshal's caprices was troubling. But stronger men had already succumbed to the appeal of power during this war. The twenty to thirty fiscales named by López could recognize the absurdity of many accusations, yet they could never act on their doubts, not even sotto voce, for to question the process was tantamount to questioning the cause. And any show of defeatism might result in their own arrest.

In normal circumstances, people who turn their back on reality are soon set straight by the criticism and mockery of those around them. At San Fernando, however, no such correctives existed for functionaries who had already learned the price of dissension. Deception and self-deception was thus permitted to multiply as in a hall of distorting mirrors, so that even the grimmest of realities bore no resemblance to what accused men and women said they saw.

### Angry Men Make Angry Justice

A stab-in-the-back interpretation of Paraguay's military decline had started to take root at San Fernando, and the fiscales saw no benefit in hindering it. Besides, acting as judges in these circumstances presupposed certain advantages. In a setting that had hitherto reserved absolute authority for one man alone, the fiscales saw their chance to exercise the power of life or death over many men, and they would not or could not resist the corruptive influences that such power entailed. One can depict them as bureaucrats doing an unpleasant but necessary service, as hard-bitten nationalist fanatics, or as hirelings who wished to guarantee their own survival by doing their master's bidding.

López himself had little to do with the judicial proceedings, and later expressed surprise that many loyal people had been detained.<sup>56</sup> Though he remained the judge of last resort (and evidently perused all the depositions), he rarely exercised his right of confirmation, commutation, or pardon.<sup>57</sup> Thompson even claimed that at San Fernando the Marshal "used to go out with his children to fish in a lagoon near his headquarters," so little did he care—or affect to care—about the trials.<sup>58</sup>

Instead, Maíz and the others enforced what the ancient law demanded, performing their tasks with a fervor that they found difficult to live down in later years. <sup>59</sup> The fiscales rejected simple evidence and looked instead for subtle motives to elucidate the purported actions of the accused, and they refused to concede that an individual's decisions could draw more from improvisation than conspiracy. By degrees, they convinced themselves and others that the revolutionary plots were real. These judges (or prosecutors, for martial law made no provision for defense attorneys) pressed hard to construct a consistent version of the truth, often resorting to the most grotesque measures to make the different accounts gel. <sup>60</sup>

The fiscales enjoyed the assistance of squads of regular soldiers delegated from the Marshal's guards. Like a procession of acolytes with heads kept low, these bare-backed adolescents went about their work in a silent, respectful manner, almost as if the trials had taken place in church. The scourge and the knotted rope were their chosen instruments, which they employed at a glance from the fiscales whenever a statement seemed sufficiently insolent to merit a reproach. Most of the time, however, the soldiers sat glumly in the background.

They may have taken a surreptitious pleasure in the trials, but they feigned indifference, for they knew better than to spoil the ritual with a demonstration of emotion.61

Torture was common. The mildest form involved riveting three heavy irons to the legs, such that the accused was compelled to crawl rather than walk to the "courtroom." But this was the least onerous of the torments. Another approach involved "stretching" (cuadro estacado), in which the accused was pressed with his face to the ground and with his hands and feet bound to leather cords attached to stakes and pulled tight. This left the victim extended into the form of a Saint Andrew's cross and subject to the full rays of the scorching sun. 62 If a confession could not be compelled even under that burden, the soldiers first withheld water and then used their whips.

The most notorious method to elicit confessions was the cepo uruguaiana, a loathsome variation on bucking whereby the victim was forced face down onto the ground with hands lashed tightly behind him; his knees were then raised and bound to the neck with leather straps, after which the soldiers loaded heavy muskets one after the other upon the victim's back.<sup>63</sup> The procedure slowly dislocated the shoulders, tore the muscles along the ribcage and rendered one or both of the arms useless. The pain was always excruciating and invariably drew out every confession required.

Torture is inherently peculiar, for while its putative function is to extract truthful information, it in fact produces something quite different from the truth. The person undergoing physical coercion will say whatever his tormentors tell him to say. They know that he knows that they know how unreal his words appear—and it does not matter. The "truth" is preordained, and like the final product in the mind of a sculptor, it has a precise shape. In this case, those at San Fernando understood that reality was dispensable. All that was needed was for the accused men and women to fill out the contours of the conspiracy.

Yet some individuals did not understand how to confess. One of these was Juliana Ynsfrán, whose torture was prolonged and relentless. It is hard not to agree with Washburn when he ascribed her brutal treatment exclusively to the Marshal's vindictiveness:

The fact that [her husband, Colonel] Martínez had surrendered rather than die of starvation was proof that he was one of the conspirators, and his wife was ordered to confess that it was so, and give all particulars of the plan and the names of the parties to it. But the poor woman knew nothing and could not confess. ... She was then flogged with sticks, and the flesh literally cut from her shoulders and back. ... What could she tell? She knew nothing. Then the *cepo uruguaiana* was applied, which was never known to fail in bringing out any confession that was asked. ... The effect of the cepo was such that persons subjected to it remained in a state of semi-consciousness for several days afterwards. Yet the wife of Martínez was kept alive long enough to undergo it at six different times, between whiles being flogged till her whole body was a livid mass.64

Doña Iuliana was told that her husband had communicated with the commander of the Paraguayan Legion (he had—to scorn Allied demands for surrender), and that she had countenanced his treasonable missives. 65 In all her time under the lash, she never managed anything more than a bewildered cry of innocence. She escaped execution for several months, though not physical abuse, and when she was finally shot, in December 1868, it came as a blessing.<sup>66</sup>

Many others had preceded her, both at the scene of torture and before the firing squad. Several of the most outstanding figures of the prewar elite were reduced to groveling idiocy in the process. Such was the fate of José Berges. The longtime foreign minister possessed a vision rare among Paraguayan functionaries. He was shrewd and could appreciate the difference between what was desirable and what was possible—a trait that had served his country well, both in previous negotiations with representatives of the British, Argentine, and US governments, and also in his nimble administration of occupied Corrientes in 1865. In fostering amicable public relations there, Berges bought his country considerable goodwill while simultaneously demonstrating that the Paraguayan state favored diplomacy over force.

This was a flexible approach that the Marshal had not initially discouraged. After the retreat of 1866, however, Berges sank into irrelevance. The once voluminous correspondence he had carried on with Paraguayan agents in Europe shrunk dramatically, for now every letter or dispatch had to be carried over jungle trails through the Mato Grosso and Bolivia, and thence to the sea. Meanwhile, the official attitude towards his style of negotiation grew frostier, and the Marshal saw less and less use for a fat, pretentious civilian who failed to conceal his gifts behind the usual mask of servility.

At San Fernando, Berges nervously attempted to defend his record. He had always proven a gifted actor in the presence of outsiders, and he tried to apply his skills as a thespian to the proceedings.<sup>67</sup> His interrogators, however, could never have been swayed by facts; besides, they had a quota to fill.<sup>68</sup> The worldly Berges, who had been sick with various ailments for a year, may have consoled himself with the knowledge that the world was insane, but nothing could have saved him.69

The former foreign minister was only one of numerous highly placed Paraguayans accused and "processed" at San Fernando during August 1868 and at other spots over the next several months. These included Berges's successor, Gumercindo Benítez; the two López brothers, Benigno and Venancio; Dean Eugenio Bogado; Bishop Manuel Antonio Palacios; eleven other clerics, and many lesser officials. Though he had lost an eye, the hapless Colonel Paulino Alén still managed to recover from his suicide attempt only to be accused of treason at San Fernando, where he was eventually dragged before the firing squad. The broad-bearded General Vicente Barrios attempted to emulate Alén's example by cutting his own throat on 12 August, but, as with the colonel, his life was saved by quick medical attention. 70 The Marshal's teenaged praetorians kept Barrios under close guard before finally shooting him in December.

Foreigners enjoyed no immunity from persecution. The European merchants and engineers who had come to the country in the late 1850s and early 1860s willingly left behind the gas-lit streets of London, Paris, or Bologna to look for their fortune in the New World. They tended to regard their sojourn as an adventure. But then they lost their enthusiasm in a wartime Paraguay that was less an earthly paradise than a dense thicket of trouble. Those European men who brought their wives and children with them fared best. Some of the others, however, made poor use of the power that López had permitted them vis-à-vis local subordinates. This arrogant attitude now worked against these foreigners, for strangers, colleagues, and acquaintances among the Paraguayans found it easy to condemn forasteros who behaved inappropriately or who had used their privileged position to assert an unwarranted superiority.<sup>71</sup>

When finally separated from Washburn in September, both George F. Masterman and Porter Bliss were promptly arrested and tortured. Bliss purchased a reprieve from the worst treatment by agreeing to write a florid—if wholly fictitious—account of Washburn's criminal intrigues. The Prussian major von Versen and several of the Marshal's British engineers eventually faced imprisonment (and sometimes the *cepo*) and survived the conflict thanks to the last-minute arrival of Brazilian troops. 72 Manlove was executed in mid-August, along with John Watts, a British machinist who had been decorated for his battle service on the *Tacuarí*. At least one other Briton was shot later, as well as an Italian riverboat captain, two Uruguayan diplomats, several of the Marshal's Correntino allies, and the Portuguese consul. Perhaps the most unusual foreigner to lose his life was an expatriate Swedish naturalist, Eberhard Munck, who was condemned in 1869 for "not having used his knowledge of witchcraft [!] to promote Paraguayan victory."73

While the tribunals of blood constituted an atrocious episode in an atrocious war, the affair still has its mysteries. Some witnesses claimed that the proceedings at San Fernando unfolded amidst an atmosphere of palpable gloom.<sup>74</sup> A surprising number of people, however, were unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened—even in the camp itself. Richard Burton, who visited the site after the Paraguayan retreat, thought that witnesses had exaggerated the atrocities committed there. As proof, he noted that those Britons in the Paraguayan service, though reckoned among the Marshal's most ill-treated

prisoners, in fact knew of these abuses only from hearsay. US naval officers, who appeared on the scene about the same time, were similarly disinclined to believe the most horrific tales.<sup>75</sup> To cite an even more revealing instance, Thompson, who was posted nearby, claimed an ignorance of the treason trials, and grew suspicious only when his friend Bruguez went missing.<sup>76</sup>

The question remains open as to whether a conspiracy ever existed, and if it did, whether it was it justified? As to the latter question, who could blame any Paraguayan for wanting to see the war come to an end in 1868? The country was practically destroyed, the people exhausted, and neither conspiracies nor executions could lift the diminished morale. Dismay at the Marshal's war policies had cropped up in every corner of Paraguay, along with the whispered griping that always accompanies a protracted struggle.

The preponderance of evidence argues against the existence of any revolutionary plot. That Benigno had had aspirations for power in 1862 was well known, but that he could have somehow contacted Brazilian agents operating through the US minister seems fanciful. Though Washburn was often pilloried as the ringleader of an anti-López scheme, he seemed a dubious choice for such a role. He was a prig—arrogant, oversensitive, and brash in the presence of people whom he thought beneath his station. He demanded absolute recognition of his country's dignity, yet was oblivious to her political interests. He always insisted that he was in the right and that everyone else was either wrong or badly informed.

That the US minister would have made a poor organizer for any conspiracy (and just as poor a follower) does not alter the fact that he knew more than he let on. Washburn was acquainted with Benigno, Minister Berges, and every other highly placed person in Asunción; he visited them regularly, often riding from the home of one friend to another, and rarely bothered to tailor his conversations to wartime conditions. He seemed to take pleasure in taunting the police in a most undiplomatic fashion.<sup>77</sup>

That Washburn refused to relocate the US legation to Luque when other foreigners acquiesced in the evacuation order appeared queer not just to López, but to everyone in Paraguay. So did his willingness first to house the property of a great many private persons (including Madame Lynch), then to arrange their money matters for them, and finally to take people in as if he were running a hotel for the rich.<sup>78</sup> Given all this, it is easy to understand why the police wanted to keep him under surveillance. But that does not mean that he was ever involved in a conspiracy.

Then there was the issue of his wife's curious statement. When she was evacuated from Paraguay in September 1868, a despondent and emotionally taxed Sallie Washburn blurted out to a US naval officer that a plan to transfer the presidency to Benigno had indeed been hatched with her husband's consent and foreknowledge.<sup>79</sup> During her stay in Paraguay, she had made much noise

as the wife of the American minister, but it was never more than vulgar ostentation or pride in her friendship with members of the "better class." This time, however, her words came back to haunt her. And though she later claimed to have been misquoted, her testimony before Congress failed to improve much under examination.80

Washburn was neither the first nor the last US diplomat to intervene in some egregious way in a host country's politics. Both the French and Italian representatives in Luque reported his involvement in a plot to unseat the Marshal, though at what level or in what capacity they refused to speculate.81 While in Paraguayan custody, Bliss produced an extensive report on the plot in which he accused his former protector of all sorts of sinister machinations. While both he and Masterman, who was compelled to offer similar testimony, disavowed their words once they were free, their confessions deserve attention from those in search of nuance in an already nebulous tale.82 Several officers of the US Navy met both men later that year and concluded that they had lied about their mistreatment. Some of the San Fernando confessions, the officers remarked, "might be true."83

And well they might. It does seem probable that meaningful dissent in Paraguay was being composed into something resembling a conspiracy—or, to use Sallie Washburn's term, a "plan"—for a world without Marshal López. More likely, there were many "conspiracies," running the gamut from simple grumbling to an active evasion of orders, to stealing and hoarding, to thoughts of displacing the government, and even, perhaps, of assassination. The meetings that occurred in Asunción and Paraguarí at the time of Delphim's raid demonstrated that government officials could act without guidance from López. If Burton is correct, then their purpose was to "bell the cat."84

But the dissidents never got their chance. Over five hundred men and women were shot, lanced, or bayoneted as a result of the proceedings at San Fernando, and in subsequent months the names of even more individuals were appended to a long list of suspects.<sup>85</sup> Despite what many of his detractors subsequently argued, López's behavior at this time betrayed no hint of clinical paranoia, nor was it even neurotic when viewed in the context of Paraguay's sinking fortunes on the battlefield. The Marshal was at the end of his tether emotionally and politically, and he struck out at those around him for want of a more obnoxious foe. Seen in this light, his fear of betrayal was rational, whether or not a conspiracy actually took place.86

López could sometimes act entirely out of malice, as his persecution of Juliana Ynsfrán suggests. In general, however, he couched his brutality in terms of necessity. More was the pity for his country, for he clearly misjudged the impact of what he had set in motion. In attempting to smash a putative rebellion among his followers, the Marshal executed, or relieved from their posts, precisely those individuals who had served him best. In so doing, he made it even

more difficult for his people to continue their legitimate struggle against the Allies. Those punished at San Fernando could not be replaced, and as Paraguay entered the darkest hour in its history, their absence would be sorely felt.