



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

ISBN 978-1-55238-810-5

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## BLEEDING, DROP BY DROP

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Historically, one of Paraguay's general misfortunes has been its leaders' obsession with imaginary enemies to the neglect of real ones. Perhaps the men and women executed at San Fernando had to die as an object lesson to others, but in suppressing the dubious plotters, the Marshal disregarded the fact that the Allies were massing to attack him. The treason trials may have provided an element of catharsis, at least for López, but they could not change the military equation. In fact, they probably made things worse. If the accusations had any truth to them, then the *patria* seethed with traitors, a situation that belied the Marshal's claim of universal support among the Paraguayan people. On the other hand, if the accusations of treason were false, then López had behaved with gross injustice to fellow citizens at a time of national crisis. Either way, Paraguayan society turned on itself at the very moment when the Allied army was poised to attack.

Regular logistical support for the Paraguayan army had declined dramatically after the evacuation of Asunción. There were areas in the north where livestock and supplies might still be requisitioned, but the organizational skill needed to make this happen was wanting.<sup>1</sup> In obliterating the alleged threat to the government of Paraguay, López had hobbled the state bureaucracy that his father had striven so meticulously to construct. Putting it back together again would be impossible.

The *jueces* of the countryside had previously managed to meet armed demands in a variety of ways. They had kept supply lines to Humaitá open despite profound difficulties. Now, having sung the song of national unity for ten seasons, they watched their own authority cheapened in the frantic search

for traitors. In every village, *pyragües* sprung up in the form of children and old women, and it was unclear which of their incessant denunciations grew out of a genuine desire to protect the public weal from domestic enemies, and which issued from personal grievances.

Those functionaries operating in distant locales survived well enough. They remained at their posts, directing their thin and ever-shriller chorus of fellow citizens in official commemorations of Paraguayan victories or in public paeans to Marshal López. They still promoted a campaign to condemn not just the kambáes but Berges, Bedoya, and other traitors, both living and dead.<sup>2</sup> Doubts about the future could scarcely have been absent among them, however, and soon they would have to leave patriotism behind and look after their own.

## To the Tebicuary and Beyond

The Allies enjoyed tremendous superiority in arms, supplies, and, for the time being, morale. The martial pride of their soldiers had been nourished by real advances in the field. Caxias had shown remarkable vitality when he first assumed command over the Allied armies, and he had kept up the momentum against Alén and Martínez for many months. His seizure of Humaitá had yet to deliver the long-sought victory, however, and he must have felt unsure about what to do next.

After several weeks, the marquis opted to advance as a response to the rumors, brought to him by Paraguayan deserters, of a revolution against López. At 7:00 a.m. on 26 August 1868, three brigades of cavalry under General Andrade Neves crossed the Yacaré. This time they encountered no surprises, and after a sharp fight, the Brazilians routed 300 Paraguayan cavalymen, killing some 45 and seizing 126 horses.<sup>3</sup>

Two days later, the same imperial units stormed a redoubt on the south side of Tebicuary. Though of short duration, this engagement was hotly contested. The attacking troops initially got caught in the sharpened boughs of the enemy abatis, but laid such a heavy fire into the opposing force that the Brazilians were able to blast through the obstacle, driving on against minimal resistance. They then cut a much bigger gap in the line and poured the remaining units through it. Lacking ammunition, the Marshal's men held on with lances and sabers, but Andrade Neves mowed them down, killing 170 and taking 81 prisoners. On the Allied side, there were 21 killed and 132 wounded.<sup>4</sup>

The Brazilians may have captured three Paraguayan cannon, together with some stacked arms, horses, and oxen, but the key benefit they gained that day was strategic. Having dislodged the Paraguayans from the south bank of the Tebicuary, Caxias sent four of Ignácio's monitors up the waterway to impose an overwhelming advantage against any enemy works further inland. Then, on 1 September, the Allies discovered that the Marshal had abandoned the defenses

that Thompson had previously established near the river; the troops boarded transports and occupied San Fernando unopposed. There they found a smoldering camp, signs of an abrupt departure, and the corpses of some three hundred fifty men, including that of the still-recognizable Bruguez.<sup>5</sup>

Dionísio Cerqueira, one of the first Brazilian officers to arrive on the scene, felt revulsion at the discovery of so many bodies and his horror at the prospect of finding further proof of slaughter as the Allies moved north:

What a sight! Even today my mind recoils at the thought of it. ... Close by we found an immense ditch piled high with corpses blackened with decay, all naked, some young, some old, all bearing horrible wounds from lances, bullets, and knives. They had slashed throats that swarmed with bluebottles, and chests torn open, with remnants of intestines that the buzzards had already worked through. All of the bodies were swollen with rot. Here and there I spied one with protruding eyes, but most were left with sockets pecked clean by the birds. ... There were many such ditches near an orange grove, all left uncovered, and each one decorated with a pole driven through a throat or mouth, and bearing the warning "Traitors to the Fatherland." It was impossible to count the number of cadavers for everything was tossed about in disorder—but there were hundreds.<sup>6</sup>

In war, atrocities become fixed in the imagination. They take on a life of their own irrespective of their immediate military impact, and, in this case, the Allies reacted less with anger at the discovery of the executions than with apprehension about the future. These new proofs of the Marshal's stern hand did not portend a swift end to the fighting. The men and women whose bodies littered the grounds at San Fernando may have been Paraguayans, but so were their executioners—and they were still alive, somewhere up ahead, waiting to do battle. The marquis could delay his march, as he had done before on numerous occasions, or he could hasten to crush them before they could build yet another defensive line further upriver. Politics—and perhaps humanity—urged him to take the second course in an attempt to end the war before Christmas. Whether this made good military sense was another matter entirely.

The Marshal had maintained the defenses south of San Fernando for as long as he could. Ever since Martínez's surrender, Allied troops in the Chaco had been poised to make a frontal assault against Timbó. The fortifications that Caballero had constructed below that camp never presented the kind of obstruction that could stave off a concerted Allied attack, and the fleet had shelled the position on an almost daily basis. Once Rivas and the Brazilians succeeded in seizing the camp, they could outflank the Marshal's main units.

With this possibility already in mind, López considered abandoning Timbó as early as the end of June, but he decided to hold after Caballero showed unexpected resiliency in repulsing a Brazilian attack on 3 July.<sup>7</sup> Three weeks later, as setback after setback dimmed his chances along the eastern banks of the Paraguay, the Marshal changed his mind and ordered Caballero to evacuate the site before the Allies could flank it and secure the mouth of the Bermejo.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, López ordered Thompson to reconnoiter the marshy areas north of the Tebicuary with a mind to establishing a new defensive position. The newly promoted colonel had already shown interest in the area around the Estero Poí, a narrow swamp similar to the Bellaco, and like its southern cousin, a natural extension of a vast inland lagoon. In this case, the Estero drained the Laguna Ypoá, Paraguay's largest lake, which was also the last natural obstacle of any size for a military force seeking to move northward toward Asunción.

Upriver of the Ypoá, the swamps gave way to lightly wooded hill country that until recently had been home to a sizable portion of Paraguay's rural population. It was also at the geographic center of the country's agrarian economy. The network of cart trails there could facilitate any Allied invasion of the Paraguayan heartland, wherein many farms and ranches beckoned as prizes. The Paraguayans desperately needed to hold on to these to prevent a general Allied offensive.

Thompson understood all of this. He located an attractive spot for a new defensive line at the mouth of the Pikysyry, a slow-flowing stream brimming with crayfish that emptied from the north end of the Ypoá into the main channel of the Paraguay. Near that confluence the *arroyo* was twenty yards across and relatively deep. This afforded an appropriate site for a fortified camp—so long as the colonel could find a sufficiently large span of dry land.

He soon discovered just what he was looking for at Angostura, along the north edge of the stream. When he reported his positive appraisal to the Marshal, Thompson received permission to erect a new series of batteries, throwing up earthworks and several gun emplacements en barbette using timber from nearby woods. In his estimation, Angostura held greater advantages for the defensive than the camps on the Tebicuary as the new site could not be flanked except on an impractically long semicircular trek through eastern Paraguay or on a similar trip through the Chaco.<sup>9</sup>

This fact appealed to the Marshal's sense of strategy. His mind had too often wandered from military matters in recent weeks, and it did him good to focus once again on killing Brazilians. He suggested that Thompson redeploy the guns held at Fortín, while he sent word to Asunción to have the Criollo brought down to Angostura. Guns were also brought from Timbó. Meanwhile, work began at a rapid pace at the new camp:

All means of conveyance were now put into requisition, both by land and water, and troops and guns were constantly arriving by steamers and by land. Quantities of ammunition were also brought. . . . The riverside became crowded with stores of all kinds. The [adjoining] wood had to be cut down both for the river-batteries, and for opening a connection between them and the trenches, and for leaving an open space in front of them. It was very hard work to cut down this jungle, and make all so low that a rifleman could not hide himself behind any of the trees. However, it made a most excellent abatis.<sup>10</sup>

Thompson's men dug new trenches and dugouts and noted with evident pleasure that their position at Angostura placed them closer to their bases of supply. Oranges, manioc, and beef thus became available to them in quantities unseen for some time.<sup>11</sup> Health standards improved accordingly, and even though many areas of the Paraguayan interior were already seeing famine, at Angostura, the men ate.

## A War of Movement

On 26 August, the same day that the Allies assaulted his forces on the Yacaré, Marshal López had abandoned San Fernando, leaving behind a number of observers and taking a slow overland route to Villeta, a rusty penny of a village located just above the Arroyo Pikysyry. The long train of retreating soldiers and camp followers that arrived at the town was noteworthy for its numbers, and for the rhythmical clanking of chained prisoners bringing up the rear.

Though the Allied fleet eventually succeeded in reaching the Tebicuary, for the moment Ignacio avoided the main channel of the big river, where his sailors still engaged in artillery duels with the battery on Fortín. On 28 August, however, the Paraguayan commander on the island received orders to retire. He pitched his three remaining guns into deep water and fled. The next morning, the crews of the imperial ironclads found themselves in virtual command of the river from the Pikysyry south.

As Colonel Thompson argued, Caxias should have taken the opportunity to instruct Ignacio to ascend the Paraguay and destroy any new batteries before the guns could be properly mounted. The marquis, however, was too busy celebrating the fall of Humaitá and the subsequent advance to the Tebicuary to see where his true advantage lay.<sup>12</sup> The marquis's circumspection was perhaps understandable—he was not a man of snap judgments—since it went against his idea of military planning to move precipitously when the intelligence on conditions further north remained hazy. He thus issued orders for the Allied

army to halt, which gave the Paraguayans the time they needed to erect the defenses at Angostura. The batteries went up with little interference.

Perhaps Caxias could afford to bide his time. The Marshal needed a great many weeks if he wanted to mount any resistance. In April he had ordered his commander at Encarnación to redeploy his troops northward to the Tebicuary, and over several weeks some twelve hundred horsemen and another one hundred infantrymen made the trek from the Alto Paraná.<sup>13</sup> This left the southeastern corner of Paraguay undefended, save for small guerrilla bands that stayed behind to harass any enemy troops coming from the Misiones.<sup>14</sup>

López also ordered the evacuation of Mato Grosso in early March, first bringing his undermanned northern battalions to Asunción and integrating them into his main force. He left behind one small cavalry unit to act as observers on the Apa frontier. Amazingly enough, the Brazilians at Cuiabá were unaware of the fact that the Paraguayans had burned the port district at Corumbá before abandoning the province.<sup>15</sup> This omission may have reflected simple ignorance, or the willful policy of a Mato Grosso government tired of adventures; either way, the Brazilians failed to capitalize on it.

By the time Caxias realized what had happened in the north, the Paraguayan units that had bested Camisão in 1867 had long since joined the Marshal and moved on to Villete; so, too, had the troops in Caballero's command—but only after 20 August, when the newly minted general abandoned Timbó.<sup>16</sup> In all, the army that the Marshal reestablished on the Pikysry counted no more than twelve thousand men and few of these could be described as able. His adversaries had more than twice that number.

A number of Paraguayan deserters who had stumbled back to their old camp at Humaitá filled Caxias's ears with news that the Marshal intended to relinquish all of the territory on or near the Tebicuary. This made good sense militarily, but since it was still unclear where the enemy troops could go, the marquis elected to wait until the Paraguayans retired.<sup>17</sup> Besides, no less than nine hundred draft animals had been lost in the marshes on the trek from Humaitá to the Tebicuary, and Caxias had to consider that fact if he wished to establish secure bases of supply.<sup>18</sup>

As it turned out, the Allies acted with elaborate care in the weeks that followed. After taking Timbó, they razed the site and then redeployed some ten thousand men under General João Manoel out of Tayí and along the land route into Pilar, which the Marshal had emptied of its population over the previous season. Caxias had no idea where the town's defenders might have gone and so dispatched a strong unit inland through the Ñe'embucú marsh to search for stragglers.<sup>19</sup> The Brazilians often displayed reticence in thrusting deep into unknown territory, but on this occasion they took the risk and went through water up to their breasts. They caught sight of caimans, capybaras, and snakes, but found no Paraguayans and thus no threat to Allied lines of communication.



In fact, the Marshal's entire army had relocated to the north, and was busily constructing Thompson's new defenses. The weather was bad, and according to the colonel, the mud at the new battery went "so deep as nearly to hide an 8-inch gun."<sup>20</sup> And yet the Paraguayans achieved a great deal. The Allied leaders had insisted that the Marshal's troops were finished, but they continued to show signs of life.

The battery that Colonel Thompson's men built at Angostura was divided into two sections of nine guns each, some seven hundred yards apart, and so constructed that any Allied ironclad that ventured too close to the "port," which was located at the right battery, would come under fire from the left. The British engineer witnessed a test of this sort on 8 September, when three imperial vessels approached from the south. He concealed the guns of the left battery with boughs, and then, when the *Silvado* steamed into his line of fire, he hit her with a shell at the waterline. The smoke and noise surprised everyone on board and delighted the Paraguayan gunners. When she withdrew downriver a half hour later, the *Silvado* was struck with a 150-pounder on the other side, yet failed to sink.<sup>21</sup>

Among the many spectators at that day's gunnery was Marshal López, who sat safely at his new headquarters some four miles from the river atop a high hill called Loma Cumbarity. He had trimmed his beard, put on a clean uniform, and adjusted his telescope to observe the engagement with the ironclads. He looked refreshed and smiled knowingly as his artillerymen fired ball after ball at the "monkeys." It seemed like Paso Pucú all over again.

In declining battle at San Fernando, the Marshal bought himself some breathing space. Instead of pursuing the retreating Paraguayan army, the Allies settled into their new positions to begin preparations for a final offensive, as López had surmised. When the war was confined to Humaitá, it was a matter of an Allied hammer swinging over and over against a piece of Paraguayan masonry, which eventually broke into pieces under the blows. Now that the fortress had fallen, the conflict became a struggle not of armies, but of small units, dispersed over a vast area in which the Paraguayans no longer required a permanent base of operations. If the Marshal adopted an evasive strategy sooner rather than later, he could hold out in the hinterland, whether or not Caxias occupied Asunción. The marquis would have to destroy the enemy before this happened.

The Allied commander was clearly not thinking of Clausewitz's dictum, according to which the destruction of the enemy's ability to wage war constituted the foremost objective. The marquis's education, his upbringing, and his previous experience in Brazil's internal struggles all suggested that once the enemy capital fell, he could count the war over, and any guerrilla resistance that might come afterwards was hardly worth worrying about.

As always, the Allied commander lacked reliable intelligence. Maps were few, incomplete, and generally suspect. Chodasiewicz had done a fine job for



the Allies in his 1867 balloon ascents, but his maps for the Humaitá area had no utility this far north. The Marshal successfully infiltrated spies into the enemy lines on most occasions. By contrast, Caxias had to depend on rumor or the word of untrustworthy Paraguayan deserters, and he could never be sure that he had gained an accurate picture. Though he questioned the viability of the Marshal's army, he was not the sort of commander to act decisively without verifiable information. He thus favored continual probes into Paraguayan territory, followed by more deliberate thrusts at the right time.

There was precious little of this in the early days of September 1868. Instead, the Allies built earthworks to fortify their own positions in the event of a López attack, which seemed unlikely but not impossible. Meanwhile, Ignácio's ships steamed up the Paraguay to learn whatever they could. The Brazilians spotted no torpedoes, no new chains, and relatively few Paraguayans, but the exact disposition of the Marshal's army remained hidden from them.

## Exit Washburn

During this time, several unrelated factors asserted themselves in the minds of both López and his adversaries. For one thing, the commander of the *Wasp* had finally secured the marquis's permission to pass through the river blockade to retrieve Washburn. The US minister had spent the previous weeks shivering in the winter cold and eating manioc and beef consommé with his wife, all the while denying every accusation of complicity in a conspiracy. Then, in mid-August, Washburn wrote interim foreign minister Gumerindo Benítez to say that if the harassment of the representative of a friendly nation did not cease, he would retire from Paraguay. Before he could respond, however, the cultured and effete Benítez was swept up into the treason trials and an ugly fate. López replaced him with Luis Caminos, the sycophantic time-waster who had helped frustrate the Gould peace initiative in 1867, and on 2 September the US minister wrote to him to demand passports for himself, his family, and his retinue.<sup>22</sup>

With the *Wasp* now anchored off Villeta, no obvious reason for delay remained, save for the unanswered question of Bliss and Masterman, both of whom worked in the legation and who had been accused of complicity in the plot. Washburn insisted that the two men, both foreigners, enjoyed diplomatic immunity. Caminos, the police authorities, and presumably the Marshal himself challenged this interpretation, directing them to appear before a tribunal to explain their criminal comportment.

Washburn balked at the implied threat, though he did accede to a government request for an accounting of the properties still stored at the US legation. Over several days he received further demands for information.<sup>23</sup> Only then did he learn that specie from the treasury had supposedly been purloined by Bedoya and this money was what Caminos wished to find. The deficits may

have resulted from poor bookkeeping, but Washburn evidently regarded the tale of lost silver as an excuse to steal any remaining coin that might turn up in private homes in Asunción. Hardly in good humor at these pointed suggestions, and frankly in fear for his life, the US minister informed Caminos that British subjects had previously removed their goods from the legation. As for the rest, the owners had requested that their properties be taken out of the country. No Paraguayan who had left property with Washburn dared to reclaim it, and with great reluctance, he left it all behind, later citing the possibility that López's agents might murder him had he delayed any longer.<sup>24</sup> More to the point, he had to consider his wife, who had reacted to the worsening situation with near-hysteria.

Captain Kirkland had no wish to involve his ship in any more diplomatic confrontations, and the Marshal refused to permit him to steam above Villeta. This left Washburn and his associates to fend for themselves. At midday on 10 September, the French and Italian consuls paid the US minister a final call, pressing their consular correspondence into his hands. Sallie Washburn and her little daughter walked the short distance to the Asunción quayside, the tiny Paraguayan steamer *Río Apa* having already arrived to carry the North American party to Villeta. Masterman stood at the door with Bliss, Washburn, and the consuls to watch as the minister's wife and her servants disappeared from view. In his memoir, the British pharmacist noted that the police then drew their swords, rushed forward, and roughly separated them from each other: "Good-bye, Mr. Washburn, don't forget us," Masterman implored, and the latter "half turned his face, which was deathly pale, made a deprecativ gesture with his hand and hurried away."<sup>25</sup> The North American later claimed that he had instructed Bliss and Masterman to invent anything about him that could save them from torture.

Washburn tried to convince Kirkland to effect some kind of rescue, but the commander of the *Wasp* declined.<sup>26</sup> He pointedly omitted Washburn's strong words of protest when he met López for a final time on 11 September. The Marshal and Madame Lynch treated him with a flawless cordiality in this last interview, but when he returned to the *Wasp*, the commander discovered that the now ex-US minister to Asunción was not to be trifled with: Washburn, it emerged, had grown angry when presented with recently composed missives from Bliss and Masterman, who, from their place of confinement, demanded that the *Wasp* delay its departure and that their former chief relinquish any papers and "historical manuscripts." These letters were manifestly the product of duress, and could be safely dismissed, especially one sent to an imaginary Henry Bliss of New York, whose "son" informed him of Washburn's role as "the head of a revolution."<sup>27</sup>

His blood now boiling, Washburn composed a final missive to López; insultingly, it condemned the Marshal, like Nero, as the "common enemy of

mankind.” Kirkland saw to it that the letter went undelivered until his ship passed beneath the batteries at Angostura, thus saving his men from a shelling but also increasing Washburn’s enmity for officers of the US Navy. As it was, the New Englander demanded to be taken to Caxias to provide the Allies with useful information. Not wanting to involve the United States in further difficulties in Paraguay, Kirkland quite appropriately denied the request.

During the entire voyage downriver, the ex-minister seethed with anger, and once he reached Buenos Aires, he gave interviews to the local press in which he commented in detail on Paraguayan military dispositions. This brought US neutrality into still greater uncertainty.<sup>28</sup> Washburn may have thought that his testimony would save lives and shorten the war, but his underlying rage, which was easy to discern, focused on settling scores against the US Navy, the Allied command, and, of course, López. The little whirlwind of complaints and demands for vindication thus set in motion resulted in a major congressional investigation in the United States less than a year later.<sup>29</sup>

## Argentina Once Again

While Washburn’s disclosures could have little impact at the front, they did succeed in diminishing Paraguay’s standing as a David facing a monstrous Allied Goliath. The country’s fame as a gallant underdog had sprung up with relative vigor in European capitals, and to a lesser extent, in the Allied countries themselves. This feeling was actuated in part by a nagging sense of guilt that the Paraguayans really had suffered too much as a result of the war, that, no matter how extensive the sins of the Marshal, his countrymen surely did not deserve such pain.<sup>30</sup> But Allied populations, having grown very tired of the war, also wanted it over as soon as possible, and were demanding some new political approach to bring this about. This attitude was increasingly present in Argentina.

That country was on the verge of inaugurating a new president, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and there was much change in the air. Elections had taken place in April and Mitre’s chosen successor, Rufino Elizalde, had finished third behind the antiwar Sarmiento and the old federalist Urquiza. The Autonomists had split their presidential vote, but came together in the vice-presidential contest, which guaranteed the Bonaerenses a strong voice in the new government.<sup>31</sup>

Don Bartolo spent his “lame-duck” months brooding about his legacy and about the pro-Brazilian policies that he had designed and which now seemed so costly and ill-considered. The loans that his government had negotiated with provincial and British banks amounted to nearly six million pesos, and though the country’s economic potential (and ability to repay) was substantial, this debt reminded the public of Mitre’s failed approach to the war. The troops deployed in Paraguay had also gone without pay for twenty months, a fact that caused much bitterness in military circles.<sup>32</sup>

Mitre was still a comparatively young man, but his adherence to the alliance made him appear a gouty old uncle trying to find a chair in a drawing room full of more energetic *políticos*. Instead of actively campaigning in favor of Elizalde, he sat on the sidelines while military officers and heterodox Liberals pooled their energies in favor of Sarmiento, who was then serving as Argentine minister to Washington. Just a few years earlier, wags in Buenos Aires had dismissed Sarmiento as “don Yo,” a provincial egomaniac who might fool foreigners with his grandiose schemes for the future but whom no one in the national capital could take seriously. At the same time, his basic competence, his commitment to economic development, European immigration, and public education were well known and approved. Mitre may have started Porteño elites thinking in terms of a country-wide modernization, but Sarmiento promised them that he could make the national transformation occur.

Part of this change required a new role for the military. Now that the Marshal’s troops had been driven from the country, all citizens might benefit in avoiding a wider war. The Argentine people now had more to fear from Indigenous uprisings along the Patagonian frontier than from the Paraguayan military. A civil conflict in Corrientes, supposedly abetted by Urquicista agents, muddled the situation even more since it required a military response from the national government.<sup>33</sup>

The death of Sarmiento’s son at Curupayty had snuffed out much of the new president’s human warmth, so that in place of a once robust, forthright, and obdurate personality, there was left only frustration and peevishness.<sup>34</sup> Strangely enough, his personal loss failed to turn him into a fire-breathing extremist, and he did not seek revenge against the Marshal’s people; in fact, his views on Paraguay remained ambiguous. As with many *provincianos* who found themselves in positions of responsibility in Buenos Aires, he retained a lingering sympathy for the Paraguayan soldiers. But at the same time he rejected everything in them that smacked, as he saw it, of native backwardness. He once noted, for example, that Paraguayan nationalism amounted to “the submission of the Indian, the slave, the barbarian, the ignorant man to his master” and that the “dog has the same obedience, the same courage, and the same fidelity to his owner.”<sup>35</sup>

Sarmiento’s view may have been racist, but he had no intention of letting it obscure his interpretation of Argentine interests. The country demanded not only victory over López, but also a broader geopolitical arrangement with the empire—something that would guarantee the cession of disputed territory while laying the groundwork for a lasting peace. Sarmiento felt that he had to adhere to the Triple Alliance Treaty but should also go beyond it in preparation for a new decade of Argentine prosperity.<sup>36</sup> Mitre had been a good ally to the Brazilians, but Sarmiento wished to be a smart politician.

## Surubiy

The war had been cruel by every measure, but the Paraguayans had given up far more than the Allies. By the time that Humaitá fell, the Marshal had lost seventy thousand men along with eight steamships, thirteen floating batteries and chatas, fifty-one battle flags, seven Congreve rocket stands, and an enormous quantity of other munitions, powder, and supplies.<sup>37</sup> To this sad statistic must be added other tangible losses, like the damage done to the civilian economy and the system of internal trade, and the horrible impact on national morale. López could congratulate himself on the stubbornness of his soldiers, who were still willing to make the sacrifices he demanded. But the country was perilously close to collapse.

The Allies made more progress in September than in August. The navy conducted various reconnaissances along the river; on land, cavalry units under General Andrade Neves had taken the lead along the muddy or washed-out trails leading northward, and the main elements of Caxias's army were not far behind. It was rough going the whole way. The road was in a dreadful state, as described by the correspondent for *The Standard*:

a succession of thick woods, thorns, and brushwood; during the three days' march the army was separated from the ... river Paraguay, suffering dreadfully for want of water, because the water of the *pantanos* was undrinkable. ... [The men] were however sustained by the idea that these were the last sacrifices imposed upon them for their country's sake, and ... to prevent a tiger in human shape from continuing to oppress his own people.<sup>38</sup>

In the second week of the month, the Allies entered Villa Franca, another forgotten village that had previously loomed large in military matters because of its depots and small port. The Allies discovered supplies stockpiled there, including hundreds of dry uniforms, six hundred harnesses and tack, arms and powder, and sufficient rations to feed one thousand soldiers for a month.<sup>39</sup> Had his steamers worked as regularly as they once had, the Marshal could have gotten these provisions to the men who needed them.

When Caxias learned that the river had none of the predicted torpedoes, he decided on a more active use of the navy. The slow deliberation of his earlier deployments gave way—momentarily—to a flush of excitement as Allied troops crowded onto ships at Villa Franca and Humaitá, from whence they were steamed upriver to a point several leagues south of Angostura. There they were ordered to reassemble their ranks and advance directly against the enemy.

The time for action had finally come. At 5:30 a.m. on 23 September, the imperial cavalry launched an assault to gain possession of a drawbridge spanning

a fast-moving stream, the Surubiy, located less than ten miles from the Pikysry. The stream lacked an obvious ford for the horses, wagons, and oxcarts, and the adjacent ground was hilly and covered in brush. This gave the bridge its tactical value, and explains why the Marshal stationed skirmishers to guard the position, daring the enemy to attack.

The official account of the engagement that followed extolled Brazilian colonel João Niederauer Sobrinho as an intrepid and cold-blooded cavalry commander—a reputation he had earned in earlier battles.<sup>40</sup> On this occasion, however, his previous experience did not work for him. He suspected nothing while approaching the approximately two hundred Paraguayans guarding the north end of the bridge. These skirmishers displayed an odd composure as Niederauer's seven hundred horsemen advanced toward them. The colonel gave the signal to charge, and the Marshal's men poured a lively volley of musketry into the oncoming troops before retreating in mock surprise. Much to their regret, the Brazilians followed. Hidden in the nearby woods was a large unit of enemy cavalry, and as soon as Niederauer got across, these forces deployed from the woods, and there "ensued the real fight."<sup>41</sup> The Brazilians wheeled round and cut their way back to the bridge. Though they managed to reach the other side, the retreating horsemen became entangled with another unit of Brazilian cavalry moving up in support and were badly shot up. In their haste to flee the scene, the first unit had collided with the second and pushed it into a corner, where Paraguayan lancers rushed upon them with a fury.<sup>42</sup>

Since ancient times, generals have argued that armies should feign confusion and strike suddenly. This is what the Paraguayans accomplished at Surubiy. Given the Allied advantage in numbers, however, the Marshal's men could not hold out. General Andrade Neves sent eight battalions of infantry to aid the cavalrymen fighting in front of the bridge, and these were soon buttressed by a battalion of Voluntários. A Paraguayan force of some six hundred now faced thirty-five hundred of the enemy. Even this imbalance failed to bring on the expected retreat, for the men of the Acá Verá, who had hidden in the sarandí alongside the main trail, swooped down abruptly on the Brazilians, achieving total surprise. Confusion reigned until the bloodied Paraguayans withdrew northward, leaving behind a small rearguard to destroy the bridge.<sup>43</sup>

Angry that his troops had been deceived by the Marshal's soldiers, Caxias preferred a charge of cowardice against his own 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, which he formally dissolved after a court-martial met on 28 September. While it was true that this battalion buckled under pressure, most of the other units were lost in the confusion as well, and it was excessive for the marquis to chastise this one detachment with a punishment "a thousand times crueler than death."<sup>44</sup> It was a display of impatience on his part. Politicians in Rio had demanded for months that Caxias stop wasting time, and move on to Asunción without further delay. He had answered their criticisms by insisting that the offensive be sure as well

as swift. Surubiy suggested that he could expect neither, and that López still had many tricks at his disposal.

## A Road Through the Chaco

General Gelly y Obes arrived at Villa Franca after Surubiy, and was soon poised to deploy his Argentine troops as the left wing of the Allied advance along the eastern bank of the Paraguay; Castro's Uruguayans were in the middle, and Caxias's main force of Brazilians on the far right. The latter troops had already moved up and secured the site formerly held by the Acá Verá, and Brazilian engineers soon rebuilt the bridge without any interference. The main defenses that Thompson had prepared at the Pikysyry still lay ahead, however, and recent experience suggested that the Allies could expect determined resistance. The Paraguayans had mounted just over a hundred guns at their new position, and had also dammed the water of the Pikysyry in three places so that the stream was over six feet deep on the high road.<sup>45</sup>

Caxias decided that the enemy defenses were too strong to be forced and resolved to turn the position from the rear. Having previously rejected an advance along the western bank of the Paraguay, he now resolved to get around the enemy batteries by constructing a road through the Chaco to a horseshoe bend in the river near Angostura; from there, he could recross the Paraguay at Villeta, move on the enemy's rear, and avoid the Marshal's batteries altogether. His engineers were far better placed to construct this road than López's men had been some months earlier. And now that Caballero's units had evacuated the Chaco, no Paraguayans could contest Allied progress through the wilderness.

The Marshal's units along the Pikysyry were weaker than their enthusiasm at Surubiy had implied. Access to provisions of beef, oranges, and manioc had improved the health and comportment of the troops, but not enough. The Paraguayans had left considerable arms and munitions behind in the rush from the south, and none of their artillery pieces could boast more than a hundred rounds.<sup>46</sup> Shipments of powder coming from the saltpeter deposits at Valenzuela had grown irregular.<sup>47</sup> As for manpower, it was likely that there were now no more than eighteen thousand men in the Paraguayan army, down two thousand from the previous month. There was little hope of reinforcement.

Though Caxias suspected that the Paraguayans had reached their final extremity, he still wanted positive proof. On 1 October, therefore, he directed Commodore Delphim to lead four ironclads and force the batteries at Angostura, testing whether the mouth of the Pikysyry was as well defended as rumored. The naval assault began before dawn and the ships succeeded in getting past the Paraguayan position. The four enemy vessels still took as many hits as they would have done by daylight, every shot of which struck an ironclad, giving out a flash of light. As Thompson related, the trees on the Chaco side



threw a deep shade over half of the river, hiding the ironclads, which could only be seen by the moving reflection of their stacks on the water. After the sun rose “eight more ironclads came up to reconnoiter, and after them the *Belmonte*, a wooden gunboat with the admiral on board. ... [The Paraguayans] put a Whitworth 150-pounder shell into her at her water-line, upon which she immediately retreated.”<sup>48</sup>

While Delphim’s ships probed the Marshal’s defenses from the river, Osório’s troops moved forward from the south on land and conducted a reconnaissance at Villeta. This required that the Brazilians approach gingerly through hilly country above Angostura and strike at the Paraguayan left flank. With this in mind, Osório surged ahead at seven in the morning, encountering heavy resistance. He engaged the enemy at several spots, seized one redoubt, and drove the defenders from the trenches. Having determined the remaining number of enemy troops, he withdrew a short while later to his previous encampments. He lost 164 men, most of them wounded, while Paraguayan losses were negligible.<sup>49</sup>

For the next seven weeks, the Allies contented themselves with minor forays and regular naval duels with the Angostura batteries. The latter confrontations proved as inconclusive as those seen at Humaitá, and in his memoirs Thompson made much of the damage he inflicted on Ignácio’s ironclads.<sup>50</sup> But the Brazilians developed considerable aptitude in repairing their vessels. The Paraguayans could observe from the opposite bank how the commodore’s men emerged from the holds of their vessels to dump splinters, torn doors, glass, and other refuse into the water—Thompson’s gunners had obviously perforated the interior of the steamers. The damage was nonetheless limited, and Ignácio’s crews soon put the flotilla back into shape.

The Allies likewise proved competent in cutting a road through the Chaco. This required a herculean effort from the engineers. They had to establish a base on the Chaco side opposite Palmas, where the main Brazilian camp was situated, and slice through the foliage on a thirty-mile track around a series of lagoons until they could emerge again on the Paraguay just above Angostura. The road they constructed required felling thirty thousand caranday palms, which were laid transversally, side by side, on muddy ground liable to flood whenever the river ran high.

The elements worked against the thousand men delegated to aid the engineers. On any given day, they could be found waist-deep in water trying to fight off the snakes, insects, and their own exhaustion. Yet even in the driving rain they kept up their labors. They built five bridges across the deepest gullies and cut through heavy masses of tangled vines and palmettos, sometimes clearing over one thousand yards daily.<sup>51</sup> They also had to contend with a brief outbreak of cholera.<sup>52</sup>

The marquis, who came to visit on several occasions, wondered whether the effort to build a road through the Chaco might prove impractical.<sup>53</sup> His engineers knew better, and so did the Paraguayan pickets who operated nearby; they could not believe their eyes as the kambáes pushed relentlessly forward. Their own military had had no similar resources during the withdrawal some months earlier, and the officers had hoped, naively, that the jungle would delay the Allies indefinitely.

The pluck of the Paraguayans was all that the Marshal really had left in the Chaco. He had organized some two hundred soldiers into a roving strike force after Caballero retreated across the Paraguay in August. This small unit, commanded by a stern-faced young captain named Patricio Escobar, could be dispatched back into the Chaco at a moment's notice. Such a small number of men, however, could only offer passing harassment to an army of five thousand Brazilians. On the other hand, Escobar had lately fallen into disfavor and was anxious to strike at the enemy to prove his loyalty to the Marshal. On two different occasions, he assaulted the Allied vanguard, first on 16 October, and then again ten days later. Neither effort accomplished anything.<sup>54</sup> Escobar's courage added to the legend of Paraguayan ferocity, yet never slowed the Allied advance.<sup>55</sup>

About a mile below Villeta on the Chaco side lays a little stream called the Araguay, which empties into the Paraguay just out of sight of that community. Though the mouth of this arroyo was narrow, it provided enough room to admit one of the smaller Brazilian paddle steamers. The Paraguayans could do little to hamper Ignácio's transport of provisions through this opening and into safer anchorages. As the engineers completed the road from the south, Caxias dispatched supplies for the entire Allied army by means of the Araguay. Meanwhile, Argolo's troops constructed camps upstream from the confluence with the Paraguay. All were well situated to launch incursions against López's positions on the Pikysry.

The Marshal could have directed Escobar or Caballero to slow Allied progress in the Chaco, but having beheld the soggy terrain at first hand, he gave little credence to the enemy's accomplishing much in that quarter.<sup>56</sup> He disregarded the reports of spies and treated the whole matter as a probable diversion from the real threat, which would come from a direct confrontation along the Pikysry.<sup>57</sup>

Osório and the other Allied generals had already positioned their forces with just such an attack in mind. This left the Paraguayans with little choice but to prepare for an assault that might come from one direction or the other, or from both at the same time. That Caxias had placed the enemy into a vise was proof of his strategic acumen, for though he may have made slow progress initially, his efforts now appeared farsighted. The marquis's building of the Chaco road was a decisive achievement and the situation in November 1868 confirmed his view that the end was near.

## The Marquis Crosses The River

Foreign military analysts have generally treated López as a third-class general and a fourth-class strategist. But he occasionally showed great skill in his use of the minimal resources available to him.<sup>58</sup> Once he realized that the marquis was more likely to move on Villeta, he responded energetically. He gave orders to construct a long line of trenches around the village, and he converted the greater part of his troops into a mobile reserve, leaving only enough men in the trenches to operate the artillery.<sup>59</sup> Five of the six Paraguayan battalions at Angostura were detached from Thompson's command to join this larger force, which the Marshal kept near his headquarters at Itá Ybaté, from whence he could deploy them at will.

A showdown of some kind was imminent, and it produced no end of worry. The news from San Fernando failed to reassure the foreigners, and the various European representatives expressed a common wish to prevent a general slaughter. As with Washburn, they feared for their fellow citizens still living in Paraguay and worried that López might kill them once the Brazilians succeeded in carrying the Pikysry positions. But they also apparently believed, as the US minister had not, that the task of negotiating their release might prove more fruitful if conducted by naval personnel on the scene rather than by diplomats in Buenos Aires. Secretary Gould had traveled by steamer to Angostura at the end of September; he obtained nothing substantial before returning downriver rather than engage in a fruitless correspondence.

His Italian and French associates enjoyed better luck. During October and November, steamers from those two countries made almost daily transits between the chief Allied camp at Palmas and Thompson's batteries at Angostura.<sup>60</sup> Caxias had finally stopped interfering with the passage of neutral vessels, probably calculating the benefit to the Allies of preventing the murder of foreign noncombatants—or at least being able to hold López responsible for their deaths.

The Paraguayans received these delegations with a syrupy politeness, offering them many bottles of carefully hoarded wine. The negotiations to free the European residents were nonetheless protracted. Part of the problem involved the Brazilian warships, nine of which had run the Angostura batteries and were shelling the Paraguayans with such regularity that the Marshal postponed several meetings.<sup>61</sup> In the end, the Italian steamer *Ardita* took away some fifty-two individuals, mostly women and children, while the French *Decidée* rescued a smaller number.<sup>62</sup> Among the Frenchmen released was Gustave Bayon de Libertat, the chancellor of the consulate in Luque, whom the Paraguayans had held in irons since 31 August for having supposedly colluded in Benigno's "conspiracy."

French consul Paul Cuverville, who on at least one occasion had journeyed to Itá Ybaté along with his Italian colleague Lorenzo Chapperon, had been unable to shield Libertat with the diplomatic immunity that Washburn had used to protect Bliss and Masterman. A long and painful interrogation directed by Fathers Maíz and Román ensued, and it was only through the hard work of Cuverville and the officers of the *Decidée* that Libertat escaped with his life.<sup>63</sup> While under torture, he had already sworn that he had received forty thousand pesos from the conspirators and was sent down to Thompson to be delivered to the French captain as a criminal. The British engineer handed him over as instructed and noticed that the steamer “took away a number of heavy cases [that] ... probably contained some of the ladies’ jewelry, which had been collected in 1867, as well as a large number of doubloons.”<sup>64</sup>

This passing reference to monies and jewelry transported on the French vessel explains another element in the Marshal’s unexpectedly gracious reception of the naval officers: he wished to send his own funds through the Allied blockade and on to Europe, where it would provide a cushion for his family in the event of a forced exile. The intended recipient of these properties was the brother of Dr. William Stewart, who was expected to guard them until Lynch or López arrived in Edinburgh.<sup>65</sup> Though details on this whole affair remain nebulous, it does for once appear that the Marshal had adopted a practical attitude about his future.

Practicality was certainly called for. In early November 1868, Caxias inspected the Chaco road that his engineers had nearly completed. Having previously doubted their ability to make any headway, he now showed considerable confidence and announced a plan to promptly strike Villeta. This declaration was in fact a ruse, for he really wanted to cross the Paraguay at a place some distance north of the town, and hoped that the Marshal would waste time preparing for a nonexistent attack.

Over the next four weeks, his troops moved artillery pieces and munitions to forward areas along the Chaco road. Meanwhile, as his naval gunners peppered Angostura, his land forces conducted a series of short but sharp probes against the Pikysyry line.<sup>66</sup> The most serious of these occurred on 16 November, when Osório’s horsemen attempted to capture several Paraguayan pickets in the hours before dawn. By one account, the Marshal’s men slipped away before the cavalry could even approach them, and according to another, the Brazilians were driven from the field with heavy casualties.<sup>67</sup>

On 21 November, the main Allied infantry units crossed the river from Palmas and, unopposed, bivouacked at a new camp on the Chaco side called Santa Teresa. The next day, the same units made their way north along the road and linked up with Argolo’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, which was already well forward. Allied troop strength in the Chaco now amounted to some thirty-two thousand men, with ample artillery and cavalry accompanying the infantry.

A few days later, having established a new headquarters at one of the Chaco guard posts, Caxias learned of a rise in the river that threatened to turn the road into a morass. Rather than see his troops bogged down at this late date, he called a temporary halt. He had no desire to postpone his grand flanking maneuver, however, and decided to use the time to mount a major diversion.

On 28 November, Commodore Dephim and four ships of his flotilla surged north toward Asunción with orders to shell the city. This barrage, it was hoped, would draw the enemy away from the Pikysyry to help defend the former capital, drastically stretching his available resources. As it turned out, Caxias failed to trick the Paraguayans into thinking this bombardment would bring an incursion of the sort that Washburn had predicted. López telegraphed news of Allied naval movements, giving his own steamer, the *Piribebé*, just enough time to escape northward—but the Marshal kept his troops where they were.<sup>68</sup>

The bombardment of Asunción occurred the next day. Delphim targeted the government buildings nearest the bay, and this time scored hits against the arsenal, customs house, shipyard, and executive palace, which saw one of its four decorative pinnacles blown apart when a ball tore through a flagstaff bearing the national ensign. The symbolic value of the target was noteworthy, but the few Paraguayan defenders in Asunción took heart when the Brazilians failed to land troops.

Meanwhile, Caxias had taken up the march once again. The waters had receded from the high mark of the previous week, and the engineers repaired the damaged sections of the road. The full force of Brazilians and Argentines pushed steadily up the Chaco trail to a spot several miles above Villeta, where they crossed unopposed on 5 December in one of the best-executed maneuvers of the whole campaign. Only a tiny number of Paraguayan cavalymen awaited them, and they withdrew at once to rejoin López on the Pikysyry. A larger column, composed of some two thousand cavalymen under Luis Caminos, had been delegated to attack the invaders but inexplicably retreated east to Cerro León, having failed even to attempt to detain the enemy.<sup>69</sup>

By dusk, over fifteen thousand Allied troops landed on the eastern bank of the Paraguay River. Despite a steady rain, Caxias sent scouts to determine the strength of any enemy units in the vicinity.<sup>70</sup> Colonel Niederauer Sobrinho's cavalry crossed a little bridge that spanned the fast-flowing Ytororó, but as he met no enemy resistance he returned to the riverfront and declared the path to Angostura and the Pikysyry clear. This fact, he seemed to suggest, set the necessary conditions for the final assaults of the war.

## Enter McMahon

On 3 December, the US warship *Wasp* reappeared off the Paraguayan position at Angostura, this time flying the colors of Rear Admiral Charles Davis,

the commander of the US South Atlantic Squadron, and carrying Martin T. McMahon, the new American minister to Asunción. Like his counterpart in Rio, James Watson Webb, McMahon was a former army general. He had spent a month in Brazil and Argentina, interviewing key personages and reading the miscellaneous reports on Paraguay. The ministry to the inland republic was far removed from the normal diplomatic posting yet romantic enough to inspire some real interest in McMahon. The fact that Paraguay was at war only made the country more appealing. The new minister had already concluded that López needed to be treated with a firm hand and that Washburn's dabbling had obstructed the quest for peace, making the extraction of foreign nationals from the war zone that much more difficult.<sup>71</sup>

The visit of the HMS *Beacon* a few weeks earlier had secured the evacuation of a handful of British subjects, and with this precedent (and that the efforts of the French and Italian naval officers) in mind, the newly arrived minister decided to try his own luck with López.<sup>72</sup> He had brought Admiral Davis along to highlight the seriousness of US resolve, and to signal that where reason and charm failed, the Americans had recourse to the kind of force to which Captain Kirkland had alluded.

As it turned out, the Marshal was anxious to meet the new minister, whose arrival could redound to Paraguay's advantage. He put on a good show. In contrast to Ulysses S. Grant, who seems to have indulged in a single bout of hard drinking during four years of war (and was ever afterwards pilloried as a drunkard), the Marshal had lately evolved into a steady imbiber. He preferred brandy and imported clarets, but at length he moved on to the local caña, of which he grew inordinately fond, regarding it as a cure for his constant stomach distress and toothache. No one at Itá Ybaté, not even Madame Lynch, had dared to chide him for the habit.<sup>73</sup> Now, however, he needed to put on an attractive face and appear self-assured and sober. Captain Kirkland requested an interview directly after dropping anchor, and informed the Marshal that Admiral Davis wished to see him on a mission of mercy. Davis met with López that evening at Colonel Thompson's thatch-covered quarters in Angostura. Their conversation grew friendlier with every passing minute, it being obvious, among other things, that both men disliked the recently departed Washburn.

Davis observed that the detention of Bliss and Masterman had created an unnecessary rift in the good relation between Paraguay and the United States but this barrier could be surmounted if the Marshal now gave up the two men. López, having anticipated this request, responded affirmatively. Despite their obvious guilt, he had hoped for some time to arrange their evacuation but had been prevented from doing so by the tribunals, whose useful work had not yet concluded.<sup>74</sup> Davis had some arguments of his own "in the shape of 11-inch guns, which would have been applied in a more persuasive manner than the Brazilians did theirs."<sup>75</sup>

The admiral, however, saw no need to underscore his firepower since the Paraguayan leader proved perfectly happy to release the miscreants, provided that American authorities promise them an appropriate upbraiding and punishment. This meant that the former employees of the legation should forswear all contact with Allied representatives, stop insisting on their innocence, and instead accept their true status as conspirators released through an act of clemency.

Whether or not the gray-whiskered Davis believed in their guilt, he agreed to these conditions. Masterman and Bliss, the latter bearing multiple copies of his notorious pamphlet, were released to US custody on 10 December. They spent the next several months in a comfortable semi-confinement on board a series of American warships before arriving at New York.<sup>76</sup> State Department functionaries escorted them to Washington to testify before Congress, where both exonerated Washburn, denounced their treatment by the US Navy, and castigated López as a sadistic criminal.<sup>77</sup>

Though these two men might have found it difficult to banish the Marshal from their thoughts, he had far more pressing things to do than concern himself with them. McMahon had disembarked on 12 December, but before he presented his credentials, the Marquis of Caxias launched the first incursion of the December campaign. At least fifteen thousand Brazilians had landed behind the Paraguayan lines. They were coming fast.



