



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

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## THE NEW PARAGUAY AND THE OLD

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It is a maxim of military tactics to press relentlessly on the heels of a defeated foe, giving him no rest and destroying his forces before they can regroup. Caxias had failed to do this after the December campaign, and the Count d'Eu had no intention of repeating his predecessor's mistake. López was on the run and it should be easy to catch him. In practice, however, the task proved far more challenging than the count envisioned.

The balance of losses between June and August 1869 was heavily against Paraguay. One eyewitness calculated that one hundred thousand men, women, and children had died of disease and hunger during the Cordillera campaign. This amounted to almost a quarter of the nation's entire population, and that number had clearly grown since that time.<sup>1</sup> The Paraguayan army had suffered more than six thousand casualties over the same period, but Allied losses were only one-fifth that number, and the count had reserves available.<sup>2</sup>

The parameters of the war thus seemed set to everyone, save perhaps to the Paraguayan boy-soldiers, who still maintained their dogged faith. For the Allied leadership, final victory was within range. Though the generals and politicians had been fooled in the past, there now existed every reason to tend to matters other than fighting. The average soldier may have looked for rest and rations, but individuals in positions of authority understood that as the military struggle faded, the political struggle was just beginning.

## Nation-building and Allied Policy

As the Count d'Eu's army dislodged the Marshal's forces from Piribebuy and Ñú Guazú, much of consequence was happening in Asunción. For one thing, Councilor Paranhos had worked tirelessly to transform Paraguayan politics. In April he had steamed downriver to Buenos Aires to confer with Argentine foreign minister Mariano Varela and Uruguayan envoy Adolfo Rodríguez regarding the petition of Paraguayan exiles to form a sovereign regime.<sup>3</sup> The councilor needed to act quickly and with more than the usual decorum. He no longer feared any action on the part of Marshal López, but there was much that could still upset his plans. With bizarre rumors circulating that the United States might intervene to bring an end to the fighting, Paranhos initiated discussions about the country's future.<sup>4</sup>

While ostensibly inspired by the remote possibility of foreign interference in Platine affairs, these talks ended by highlighting tensions between the empire and Argentina. The councilor stressed that neither the inviolability of Paraguayan sovereignty nor the Allied claims on territory could be modified. The new government, whatever its composition, needed to accept those claims as a condition for peace, and though Rodríguez eventually fell into line on these interpretations, Varela demurred. While careful to reiterate his government's historical claims in Misiones and the Chaco, the Argentine foreign minister insisted that the 1 May 1865 treaty could not constitute the sole basis for peace. His government, he noted, had negotiated the treaty during the Marshal's invasion of Corrientes, when feelings still ran hot. At that juncture, each one of the Allied powers could pretend to the status of an offended party seeking redress in the common goal of ousting López from occupied territory. Now, with the Marshal on the run, and the Brazilians in charge at Asunción, the Argentines could only appear as late arrivals.

The Brazilians adamantly opposed any hint of a "Greater Argentina," but though Varela spoke of the historical links that tied Paraguay to the other Platine states, he lacked the power to do anything more than complain.<sup>5</sup> He assumed a posture that simultaneously expressed never-ending friendship for the Paraguayan people and a break on imperial ambitions. He did worry that putting together an interim regime in Asunción might constitute an unwelcome diversion as long as López was still at large. It was likewise far from clear that such a government, no matter how it was constituted, could negotiate the peace accord that Sarmiento defined as a priority.<sup>6</sup>

The Mitre government would never have risked confronting the councilor when Argentina could still profit commercially from the Alliance. Varela's assertiveness, however, revealed an obvious—and justifiable—fear about the empire's goals in the Plata, and suggested a reversion to the anti-Brazilian stance of the previous decade. Now, with Paraguay a shadow of its previous

self, he had to prevent its becoming a Brazilian colony (as had already happened, to some extent, with Uruguay). The best way to do this was to work with the Paraguayans who had migrated to Buenos Aires during the 1840s and '50s. These were the same men who had formed the Sociedad Libertadora, the Asociación Paraguaya, and other exile organizations. A few subsequently officered the units of the Paraguayan Legion, and were generally seen as friendly to the Sarmiento government.

Whatever the orientation of the Paraguayan exiles, the task of putting together a new regime would not be easy. As the editors of *The Standard* put it, "the mission of Señor Paranhos, whatever its secret success may have been, has certainly not ... [led] to a hope that the war is near its close."<sup>7</sup> The councilor took Varela's points in good stride. He had his own criticisms of the Brazilian military's comportment in Asunción. He evidently saw the army as a poor custodian of the country, having too readily tolerated the graft that sutlers cultivated in the officer corps, and not knowing how to assist the civilians who flooded into the city. No infrastructure existed to cover the needs of these displaced people, who simply followed the Brazilian soldiers around in droves, begging without humility, their bony hands stretched out to take anything offered.

Paranhos could only act with cold realism. He had grown tired of the financial burden of Allied charity, which had cost the exchequer thousands of *milréis* in rations distributed out of army stores to the unfortunate refugees.<sup>8</sup> The councilor may have felt sympathy for their condition, but he also blamed them for having blindly followed the "despot" into penury and ruin. Now, with no obvious relief in sight, he preferred to pass responsibility for these wretches to some Paraguayan regime and attend to more pressing administrative tasks.<sup>9</sup>

No matter what Varela said, Brazilian preeminence over civilian and military affairs in occupied Paraguay could not be denied. The empire had earned the right to set the agenda, and its objectives were fourfold: signing peace treaties favorable to Brazil; fixing the amount of Paraguayan war reparations; establishing clear and unquestioned borders; and gaining recognition for long-term Paraguayan independence.<sup>10</sup>

The Argentine foreign minister had no way to alter Brazil's goals, and he eventually gave in to pressure not just from Paranhos, but also from the remaining Mitristas in the national government who wanted no confrontation with Brazil.<sup>11</sup> Besides, the Argentines coveted additional territories in the Paraguayan Chaco, an acquisition for which they had no legitimate claim; if they were to succeed on this matter, they could not afford to anger Paranhos. So, Varela, Rodríguez, and the councilor postponed consideration of the more controversial territorial questions for another day.<sup>12</sup> The Paraguayan delegates who witnessed their conversations were given no leave to object or to assert their own opinions.

## The Cost of Factionalism

While seemingly anxious to grant the Paraguayans their proper share of freedom and the “generous sympathies of the Allied governments,” Paranhos and his associates insisted that any Paraguayan government “bind itself to proceed in entire accord with the Allies until the termination of the war.” They prohibited the new regime from any role in military matters and forbade unauthorized contacts with the Marshal’s agents.<sup>13</sup> The Paraguayan delegates agreed to the Allied protocols on 11 June, but only after trading a great deal of insults among each other. Resigned to the bickering that was sure to come, the delegates steamed back to Paraguay with friendly messages from Paranhos and Varela. Everyone hoped that the various parties in Asunción would simply support the Allied commissioners.<sup>14</sup>

It was not easy. The exiles had already joined together with defectors from the ancien régime to form several mutually antagonistic political clubs. These associations asserted ideological goals, yet acted as though private grievances were paramount. The Asuncenos understood this and tended to qualify the factions in personalist terms, as groupings of local grandees, their extended families, and retainers. Despite the social ties that linked the groups together, they all had constantly shifting memberships. It was not even clear that they were uniformly anti-Lopista.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the Brazilians favored Colonel Fernando Iturburu to head the new government. He had commanded the Paraguayan Legion, and was a good friend to both Mitre and the empire. The colonel’s candidacy came naturally to a man who enjoyed recognition among all the factions, and who boasted prestige from earlier days. But Iturburu had an ambitious streak, and instead of biding his time, he got involved in a scheme to place a presidential sash around Juan Andrés Gelly y Obes. This notion of elevating an Argentine general to the Paraguayan presidency never stood much chance of success and when Councilor Paranhos learned of it, he accused Colonel Iturburu of sidestepping legitimate imperial concerns and perhaps even thinking of handing Paraguay over to the Argentines.<sup>16</sup> Paranhos saw no reason to tolerate that.

As Iturburu’s star set, the shape of the future government was left open. The faction led by Colonel Juan Francisco Decoud and his twenty-one-year-old son, José Segundo, had displayed considerable industry during Paranhos’s absence in Argentina. Though the elder Decoud could not always control this group of men, his clientele remained the strongest force within it, and José Segundo was clearly its brightest light. The faction-within-a-faction that he dominated was sufficiently secure by late June 1869 that its members could announce its formal organization as the Club del Pueblo, avowedly the most “liberal” of the various inchoate Paraguayan political organizations.<sup>17</sup> Given their wide reading and eloquent predictions of future prosperity, the Decoudistas might have seemed

innovative, but those Paraguayans who grew to manhood in Buenos Aires had heard liberal blather before. Rhetoric alone could never bring the Decouds any advantage over Paranhos. Nor could it guarantee them uncontested sway over the political actors vying for power in Paraguay.

The faction associated with Cándido Bareiro could claim a similar influence. It boasted a curious composition of former Lopista officials (who had sat out the war in Montevideo, Buenos Aires, and Europe), and the surprisingly large number of legionnaires and liberal exiles who could not stomach the Decouds. Organizers had met at Fernando Iturburu's residence at the end of March to establish the Club Unión Republicana, the "conservative" counterpart to the Decoudistas.<sup>18</sup> The 338 signatures affixed to the formal announcement of the founding of the organization suggested a wide following, much larger than the 50 or 60 men associated with their rivals.<sup>19</sup> But a good many names were evidently copied from tombstones at the Recoleta cemetery.<sup>20</sup> A more accurate account of membership numbers would probably reveal around 100 men, 74 of whom were legionnaires associated with Iturburu.<sup>21</sup>

Neither faction relished the role of procurer for Brazil or Argentina. Yet neither saw any option other than putting their members up to the highest bidder. As was true of their successor organizations in the 1880s—the Liberal and Colorado Parties—the ultimate character of the clubs was personalist no matter what the coloration of their flags. As Paranhos, Decoud, and all the other political contenders well understood, Paraguay was a small country that could ill afford to leave any talented man completely on the outside, so Bareiro had to be included and so had the Decouds.

The Allies had to tolerate divisions among their chosen friends; they knew what they wanted even though many Paraguayans did not. Paranhos directed that an emergency junta of three individuals shoulder the executive authority on a temporary basis until a constituent assembly could determine a permanent political structure for the republic. At its inception, Paraguay's provisional government thus took the form of a triumvirate more beholden to Paranhos than to the other Allied representatives. In exchange for their show of fealty, the triumvirs could demand Allied moral support and whatever material aid the Brazilians chose to throw their way. The provisional government maintained a facade as a purely Paraguayan body, but always responded to Allied interests. For example, one provision in the protocols of 11 June promised uncontrolled ingress and egress for foreign sutlers in Paraguay, which guaranteed that the smuggling that had gone on since January 1869 would continue indefinitely.<sup>22</sup>

The Club del Pueblo named Cirilo Antonio Rivarola as its candidate for president of the triumvirate. A lesser member of an important landholding family, Rivarola had studied law before the war but his injudicious talk constantly got him in trouble. He quarreled publicly with a *jefe político*, who jailed him for many months. In 1868, Rivarola was released (perhaps at the instigation of his

uncle Valois) and then drafted into the army as a corporal. He fought at Lomas Valentinas, was captured by the Brazilians, escaped, and rejoined López, who promoted him to sergeant. But he remained free for only a short time before being rearrested later, this time for military ineptitude. He was rescued in May 1869 by the Brazilians, who thereafter treated him as a favorite. Grateful to his captors, Rivarola gave the Count d'Eu extensive information about Paraguayan dispositions in Azcurra and spoke freely of his hatred for López and hopes for the nation.

This was not the reaction that most Paraguayan soldiers displayed as prisoners; even those exiles who had fought in the Argentine ranks had their own agendas and scores to settle, and these had little link to the Allied cause. But Rivarola could be cut according to the empire's own standard. His Highness granted him automatic ingress among the Brazilians along with a safe-conduct pass to travel to and from Asunción.<sup>23</sup> There Rivarola made contact with different factions who bid for his attention, and accepted the support of José Segundo Decoud, who evidently thought to turn the man into a tool of the Club del Pueblo. In this curious manner Decoud nominated the improbable Sergeant Rivarola to head the provisional government.<sup>24</sup>

The Club Unión Republicana, not to be outdone by this odd selection of Rivarola, chose as its candidate Félix Egusquiza, a cousin of the Marshal who had acted as his commercial agent in Buenos Aires before the war. But despite this family relation, Egusquiza had lately cooperated with whichever group seemed most ready to take power.<sup>25</sup> The Argentine and Uruguayan commissioners had less faith in Rivarola, whom they usually dismissed as a pretentious mediocrity.

The Allied representatives must have felt annoyed at all the Paraguayans for their stubborn refusal to agree on a common candidate.<sup>26</sup> The leaders of the two clubs felt just as annoyed at the Allies for trying to define the character of Paraguayan patriotism, and still hoped to use Argentina against Brazil and vice versa. On 21 July, a grand assembly convened in the National Theater. It was composed of 129 notables but featured Paranhos as carefully pulling the strings from the side. The electoral procedures, which the Brazilian minister had already composed in private, were quickly accepted, leaving only an angry measure of *ad hominem* debate to follow.

The delegates' greed for power was inversely proportional to how little power there was to covet. Indeed, despite all the vituperation, the meeting had gone as Paranhos envisioned—and he was the one who mattered. When the electoral committee members met on 5 August, however, they omitted Rivarola's name from the three men chosen, and instead put forward the names of José Díaz de Bedoya, Carlos Loizaga, and Juan Francisco Decoud as potential stand-ins for José Segundo, the heir apparent.

This effort vexed Paranhos. All his subtlety had been wasted on these artless rubes. So he set aside all pretense, raised his finger (but not his voice), and insisted that the committee drop the former colonel's name in favor of Rivarola or someone tied to the old Iturburu faction.<sup>27</sup> The Decoudistas then made ready to walk out en masse, and the meeting started to collapse into pandemonium. It fell to Paranhos to play the agglutinative role. From time to time during the proceedings he extracted a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket, and passed it across his bald pate, mopping the sweat away in a deliberate motion. With this simple gesture he signaled that his patience had come to an end—he was willing to act as midwife but not as referee.

In due course, the participants assumed a more serious demeanor. Everything, they knew, could be gained from cooperating with this man, and much could be lost by seeming to oppose him. Though the councilor personally detested Juan Francisco Decoud, he approached the man directly and persuaded him to withdraw his name; in exchange, the colonel accepted a series of appointments for his adherents to secondary positions in the new government. Rivarola warily concurred, and the meeting broke up.<sup>28</sup>

The triumvirate was formally installed in a public ceremony on 15 August, by custom, the day observed to honor Our Lady of the Ascension.<sup>29</sup> This was well chosen as a time for renewal, but things did not seem so well further inland. Piribebuy had just fallen and only hours remained before the boy-soldiers at Ñú Guasú breathed their last. The war had not ended in the interior districts, where talk of the future seemed horribly out of place. It was as if there were two separate countries.

The installation of the provisional government provided the first opportunity for celebration that Asuncenos had experienced in many months. Politicians read prepared speeches in the Plaza 14 de Mayo and bands played triumphal airs. Local inhabitants, sutlers, interested bystanders, and a few Lopista spies filed into the cathedral, where the Argentine military chaplain administered the oath of office to the triumvirs. This was followed by a deadpan declaration from Rivarola who promised cooperation with the Allies. There was much pomp, much fuss, much tricolored bunting to decorate the whole affair. And while the councilor hosted a luncheon for dignitaries at the Brazilian legation, the public was treated to a presentation of flamboyant street theater.<sup>30</sup>

## The Provisional Government

For all of its false glitter, the symbolic passing of an era aroused more irony than jubilation. The time had not long gone when the Lopista regime had insisted on full public participation at national rituals during which all citizens were obliged to offer monetary contributions to the cause. People remembered how upper-class society women were forced to attend such festivities and dance with

illiterate corporals until two in the morning. They remembered how “prostitutes” were elevated to positions of privilege. They had to ask themselves if this new regime would really be different.

The men who replaced the Marshal seemed more like morticians than honest patriots. The best among them acted at Paranhos’s behest. A puppet regime could provide more than the oblivion that López offered, but no one expected the councilor to transmute Paraguayan factionalism into something sound. As chief of the new triumvirate, Rivarola was described by one prominent Decoudista as a “splenetic spirit, devoted to legal forms and with arbitrary and despotic instincts; a mixture of good and evil, of truth and falsehood ... a man without character.”<sup>31</sup> Character he may have lacked, but he had sufficient liberal antecedents to make himself attractive. He could boast some knowledge of the law, which was a rare thing in Lopista Paraguay, and he also deserved recognition for having spoken in favor of peace with the Allies when such talk normally brought execution. The Count d’Eu had done everything he could to sculpt the barefooted Paraguayan sergeant into a figure of political substance. Even Councilor Paranhos recognized his potential and this was enough to earn Rivarola the senior position in the Triumvirate.

His fellow triumvirs, Carlos Loizaga and José Díaz de Bedoya, were distinctly less significant. Both were former members of the Asociación Paraguaya who had participated in the convoluted political haggling in Mitre’s Buenos Aires and had switched in and out of various exile factions over the years. Neither had any experience of government administration.

Once an old fox and now merely old, the Decoudista Loizaga was a reader of poetry and adventure stories. Though he had suffered little compared to Rivarola, he appeared visibly fatigued and anxious to retire from public scrutiny.<sup>32</sup>

The stout, clean-shaven Díaz de Bedoya, who cut a figure vaguely reminiscent of José Berges, was the younger brother of Saturnino Bedoya, the onetime merchant who married the Marshal’s sister and ultimately died before the firing squad as a “conspirator.” Like his brother, Díaz de Bedoya was an opportunist, greedy and sparsely educated, but willing to conform to whatever policies Paranhos indicated. When sent to Buenos Aires shortly afterwards to obtain financial help for the provisional government, he disappeared into private life, absconding with silver taken from Paraguayan church altars that the new government wished to use as collateral.<sup>33</sup>

For those Asuncenos who had survived the fighting, Rivarola and his associates seemed little better than Brazilian lackeys. There were other men available for the job, but none stood any chance of success without Allied patronage. Those Paraguayans demanding a swift return to true sovereignty could only find disappointment. They could choose one anti-nationalist puppet over another, or resign themselves to the return of López or someone in his image. That said, a cup of water that is three-quarters empty can also be one-quarter-full.

Those Paraguayan exiles coming home from Buenos Aires professed a more optimistic attitude than those who had been in Asunción since the advent of Allied occupation. The newcomers regarded the earlier protocols as a reasonable starting base for the reconstruction of the country.

While some Paraguayans willingly gave the triumvirs a chance to build something out of very little, the foreign powers unanimously scoffed at the new government's legitimacy. The Marshal's friend, General McMahon, who was in Buenos Aires en route to London, observed with disgust that the Allies had sought

to collect from all parts of the country such of the unhappy people of Paraguay whom famine and suffering compel to abandon the national cause, for the purpose of furnishing a constituency to this pretended government. These people ... [are] paraded mercilessly through the streets for days naked and footsore to be exhibited to the army of traders, sutlers, and camp-followers who throng the city occupying the very homes of the poor unfortunates who are thus so publicly exhibited.<sup>34</sup>

McMahon still supported the Marshal, who at that moment was barely holding out. But even those diplomatic agents of foreign states with nothing positive to say of López could not be reassured by Allied designs for a new government. The British minister dismissed this state-in-the-making as "a shadow behind which the Allied governments will seek to elude some of their most serious and embarrassing responsibilities without dispossessing themselves of any material power." The Italians and the French voiced similar skepticism.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps predictably, the same contempt for outside opinion that had animated the Marshal also found its place in the hearts of the men who succeeded him. The triumvirs knew that their long-term hopes for power rested on their short-term willingness to kowtow to the Allies. Meanwhile, to gain legitimacy, they had to supplant López in the minds of everyone concerned. The fathers had preferred exile to tyranny; the sons, power to anonymity.

They certainly wasted no time in making this priority known. On 17 August, the provisional government issued a decree that defined how the Marshal and his remaining supporters fit into the new politics:

The first duty of every Paraguayan in this supreme moment is to endorse as far as possible the victory of the Republic and Allied governments, to whom our cordial thanks are due, by lending them assistance against the tyrant López, the scourge of the people. ... Any citizen who continues to serve the tyrant, or who neglects to assist ... the old men, women, and children forced to die

in awful misery in the forests, shall henceforth be considered a traitor. ... [The provisional government likewise decrees] that the impious monster López ... who has bathed the country in blood, [ignoring] every dictate of human and divine law, exceeding in cruelty every despot or barbarian mentioned in the page of history, be hereby declared an outlaw, to be ejected forever from the soil of Paraguay ... as an enemy to the human race.<sup>36</sup>

The triumvirs had to find some way to differentiate themselves from the Marshal. They were builders, they insisted, not destroyers. They therefore issued a manifesto, printed on the Brazilian army's press, which alluded to the narrow "escape from martyrdom" that the Paraguayan people had made, and the need to break with traditions of "tyranny," with forced isolation, and with neighbor spying upon neighbor.<sup>37</sup>

As Paranhos had foreseen, the refugee problem had grown considerably by the time the provisional government came to office; *The Standard* left no room to underestimate the difficulties the triumvirs would face in this respect:

The city is crowded in every part, and a house or a room cannot be obtained for love or money. There are about 10,000 natives, mostly women or children, and as the arrival of sufferers from the interior continues daily, the authorities are putting up tents for them in the outskirts. The Allies give out rations daily to those poor starving people. No words can describe the horrible condition of the refugees that each train from Pirayú brings in to the capital; they seem living skeletons, and some of them are boys of ten or twelve years old, for the most part shockingly mutilated with bullet and saber wounds. Strangers are quite astonished at the extraordinary endurance of these Paraguayans, who survive sufferings that must prove fatal to Europeans.<sup>38</sup>

The provisional government committed itself to a general reorganization. In a flurry of new legislation, the triumvirs named new *jefes políticos* in towns vacated by the Marshal's troops, eliminated tariffs, and authorized the sale of stamped paper. With an eye to raising revenues from rents, they declared as public property the National Theater and the slaughterhouse, and issued licenses for commercial establishments.<sup>39</sup> They convinced the Brazilian army to hand over stocks of yerba, tobacco, and hides stored in the city's warehouses and which could also be used to raise revenues.<sup>40</sup> In a move obviously inspired by the Count d'Eu, they formally abolished slavery in the country.<sup>41</sup>

Liberal ideology held that governments should derive their powers from the consent of the governed, but there was nothing liberal about the triumvirs;

they might dispense favors, but sharing power with the people was not part of their mental makeup. They told citizens that, from now on, the state would aid, rather than exploit them, and that they had to be satisfied with that.<sup>42</sup> The triumvirs set up work camps on abandoned farms outside Trinidad to provide food for those in the capital. They also established a commission to care for the needs of invalids and orphans. But they prohibited the siesta, which was “prejudicial to the [spirit] of activity the times call for,” and proscribed the use of the Guaraní language in schools, because it had been used in *Cabichuí* and *Cacique Lambaré* to propagate *Lopismo*.<sup>43</sup>

Some of these decrees and prohibitions seemed absurd, others merely impractical. Now that the former exiles had a semblance of power they made promises that seemed just as hollow as the Marshal’s evocations of national glory. Even the faction out of power used similarly turbulent rhetoric. The Club del Pueblo maintained great visibility thanks to *La Regeneración*, a newspaper funded by the Decoud family in October 1869. It claimed to champion the rights of those Paraguayans who had nothing, but its jeremiads against other factions make today’s readers wince.<sup>44</sup> Eventually, the Bareiristas established their own newspaper, *La Voz del Pueblo*, which proved just as sulfurous in its rhetoric.<sup>45</sup>

To Paranhos, as virtual viceroy of Paraguay, political promises meant little. He was perfectly content to flatter the triumvirs despite a secret indifference to their troubles. To the masses still struggling for a piece of *chipa* or a scrap of dried meat, the slogans meant nothing at all, for the provisional government had little effect on those poor Paraguayans who most needed help.<sup>46</sup> The triumvirs boasted no more dedication to the lower classes than had the Marshal. And unlike López, the various liberal factions perceived no pressing need to mobilize the country people in order to survive. Brazilian patronage may have mattered, but Paraguayan public opinion did not. If the war continued into the new decade, it was not because the provisional government had any say-so in it—it was because the war had forged its own dynamic. And as the skeletal soldiers of the Paraguayan army fled into the forests with Marshal López, the final hand was ready to be played.

## The Advance to Caragatatay

Any consideration of the provisional government provides evidence to prove that farce covers a greater expanse of human endeavor than philosophy. One could add that the arcane political posturing in Asunción had almost nothing to do with the ongoing war. Paraguay’s continued existence as a nation was perhaps no longer in doubt, but the Paraguayans’ survival as a people was quite another matter. While in the capital debate and political rancor provided color to an otherwise dreary tableau, the shenanigans were only minimally related to what mattered most in the interior districts: how to live to the next day.

Though the eastern half of Paraguay was and is the most settled section of the nation, in 1869 it still boasted vast stretches of unpopulated and heavily wooded territory. Aside from young men who had labored in the region's widely dispersed *yerbales*, few in the country had ever visited these areas, which on contemporary maps were marked simply as "forests." Yet it was precisely these districts that Marshal López had to traverse in his flight from enemy forces. And for the first time in the war, he knew as little about the terrain as did the Allies.

To the Marshal's rear, disaster was approaching. On the 17 August, the two enormous columns of the Allied army finally came together in the hill country between Caacupé and Ñú Guazú. These units, which included the Brazilian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps and Emilio Mitre's Argentine units, had remained at some distance from each other for over a month as part of the count's plan to trap the enemy in a pincer movement. Though he had taken some casualties in the effort, Gaston's overall strategy had worked well. Thus far, the Brazilians and Argentines had won minor engagements along the southern edges of the Ypacaraí, at Tobatí, Pirayú, Cerro León, Valenzuela, and Ybytymí, along with two major victories at Piribebuy and Ñú Guazú. Unfortunately for the count, these victories failed to compel the Marshal's surrender and the final placement of the pincer left some units to the northeast, just outside the circle. Allied troops therefore had to move quickly on Caraguatay, a sleepy, fly-blown village, the last community of any significance for many miles. Perched on the brow of a semicircular range of hills, and hemmed in on one side by *sarandí* and the other by marshes, Caraguatay presented a good site for defense.<sup>47</sup>

Gaston had broken the Paraguayan army during the Battle of the Children, but he needed to finish it or else have López escape, leaving his men to disperse into bands of marauders that could maintain guerrilla warfare indefinitely. A Paraguayan army thus reduced was incapable of really threatening the Allied occupation, though it might still be strong enough to contemplate continued mischief in the interior districts.

Caraguatay beckoned, and the count needed to find a route through the nearby woods by which the Allied force could flank the Paraguayans and hopefully annihilate them. The mission obligated him to dispatch his available troops—nearly seventeen thousand strong—in three sizable columns toward the town.<sup>48</sup> Gaston accompanied them on the advance, all the time awaiting word of contact with the enemy. Scouts reported hundreds of starving refugees coming down the trails, but there was no sign of the Marshal.

While we know that the count felt tense and anxious to end the struggle once and for all, no comparable picture of López's attitude has come to light. He had sufficient presence of mind to order Caballero to prepare to a shallow trench line at Caraguatay, but the troops delegated to put together the resistance had no chance of slowing the enemy. When General Victorino assailed the prepared position on 18 August, he discovered some two thousand boy-soldiers under

Colonel Pedro Hermosa waiting. The Paraguayans were not deeply entrenched (there having been no time for such preparations), but they nevertheless tried to hold the line.

They got nowhere. Morale had plummeted among the Paraguayans in the twenty-four hours since Ñú Guazú and the fighting spirit that had once so impressed their enemies was just not in them that day. The engagement, sometimes dubbed the “battle” of Caaguy-yurú, may not deserve that appellation, for it was a simple scrimmage, quickly and decisively concluded. Hermosa stood no chance of countering the Allied attack through improvisation, and he enjoyed no luck. Though the field was covered with thick fog, the Brazilians discovered the enemy dispositions, while their adversaries knew neither the strength of the Allied units nor their direction of approach. Seven Brazilian battalions attacked the Paraguayans head-on at mid-morning. The fog obscured their advance, and they stormed the trenches just as Hermosa fired his twelve cannon, the shells going over the Brazilians’ heads. A reserve battalion of Voluntários cut through the brush from the west and helped the infantry envelop the position.

Paraguayan losses were heavy. Brazilian fire disabled some of the enemy guns, but Taunay recorded that the Allies captured all 12 pieces intact. Colonel Hermosa lost 260 killed and another 400 of his men fell prisoner. Around 1,300 Paraguayans, including Hermosa, succeeded in escaping into the forest.<sup>49</sup> The Allies listed losses of 13 killed and 143 wounded, but the true figure probably exceeded twice that number.<sup>50</sup>

For all the obscurity of the encounter, the vengeance taken by the Brazilians at Caaguy-yurú was unmistakable. In the predawn hours, before the contending sides met in combat, two Brazilian teamsters leading pack mules accidentally stumbled across the Paraguayan position. The two men, who were carrying supplies of new uniforms for the Allied troops, had had trouble urging their animals through the woods, and had failed to notice the enemy sentinels who proceeded to shoot them down. The Marshal’s soldiers found no provender among the various packs, and as they had no clothes of their own, they helped themselves to the uniforms, including those of the two dead men. When the main Brazilian units encountered the teamsters’ naked corpses shortly thereafter, word went around that the Paraguayans had left them hanging from trees as if to kipper their bodies in the sun.<sup>51</sup>

Though Paraguayan defenders had had no time to commit the suspected atrocities, General Victorino beheaded eighteen Paraguayan officers anyway, one in the presence of his young son who had begged for his father’s life.<sup>52</sup> This revenge sickened the Brazilian officers, who were eager to move on to Caragatay and leave this place behind. They reached the town in the late afternoon. A once thriving community, it was now a forlorn place consisting of a dozen empty buildings, an absence of tilled fields, and nothing to pillage, not even chickens. A population of destitute women still lived at Caragatay,

however, and, in the evening, a group of girls, more curious than afraid, grew bold enough to approach the Allied soldiers to ask in ungrammatical Spanish if the Argentine military band would play them a number of dance tunes.<sup>53</sup>

López, to no one's surprise, had disappeared.

## Destruction of the Fleet

As Allied troops explored their depressing prize, they presumed that the Marshal had fled to San Estanislao de Kostka, a village many miles to the north that the Paraguayans often call Santaní. In 1869 it was a profoundly isolated place that could only be reached after a long march over poorly known ground. While the generals pondered whether they should descend on the town or make some other move, word arrived concerning the missing Paraguayan fleet.

The previous January, it will be recalled, the Marshal had ordered its withdrawal into the interior of the country by way of the Río Manduvirá. The imperial fleet tried to follow in April, but the Brazilians only got so far as the river's confluence with the Yhagüy, where they discovered that the enemy had dumped carts, tree trunks, and other debris into the water to block the passage upstream.<sup>54</sup> Contenting himself with the knowledge that the Paraguayans could never use the ships they had taken into a cul-de-sac, Commodore Delphim steamed back to Asunción. He was confident that as far as the navy was concerned, the war had ended.<sup>55</sup>

Heavy rains had fallen during the intervening month, however, and this permitted the Paraguayan fleet to continue upriver into districts rarely reached by vessels with even the shallowest of drafts. Six ships—the *Apa*, *Anhambaí*, *Salto de Guairá*, *Ypora*, *Paraná*, and *Pirabebé*—pushed up a narrow channel, past forests of half-submerged, leafless trees wrapped with slimy lianas. The water receded a month later, leaving the ships stranded at a very remote spot later christened Vapor Cué (which in Guaraní denotes “where the steamships once were”).

The little fleet remained secure over the next few months, but the crewmembers had to give up any thought of escape to the main channel of the Paraguay. Maneuver for the ships along the creek bed of the Yhagüy was likewise out of the question, so the sailors removed the ships' cannon and sent them south to Marshal López. This left them with only muskets to defend the site.

The war was coming their way and the crews had to scuttle the vessels upon which they had lived and fought for five years. Delphim (and, for that matter, Tamandaré) would have sympathized with their emotions, for it seemed like smothering a beloved but terminally ill family member. Certainly the sailors had no time to spare. Two days after Ñú Guazú, cavalry under General Câmara approached out of the woods that separated the site from Caraguatay. The sailors had heard the sounds of rifle fire coming from the village the previous

afternoon, so what happened next came as no surprise. They hastily assembled at a forward position a half mile to the front of their ships. It was a foggy morning and they peppered the oncoming the Brazilian horseman as best they could with rifle shot. After only a few minutes' resistance, they fled into the eastern forests where they hoped to join Caballero in his retreat from Caraguatatay.

Meanwhile, their comrades set charges in the ship engines, blasting them to pieces while fires spread upon the decks, rendering the vessels useless.<sup>56</sup> The ships settled into the shallow Yhagüy. Steam stacks, masts, and pieces of metallic hulls jutted out of the water in improbable configurations like headstones in a swampy cemetery. The hulks soon rusted and were covered by the verdigris of time, the once proud ships of the Marshal's navy eventually becoming indistinguishable from the muddy-green arroyo.

## Hot Pursuit

While Brazilian engineers surveyed the wrecked fleet, the Count d'Eu had to wonder where the main Paraguayan columns had gone. It turned out that General Caballero, who now had charge of the Paraguayan rear guard, had succeeded in gaining the yerba districts some miles to the north. A few of the men in his units had served as *yerbateros* in these remote locales and could guide their fellows through the forests—an effort that involved more challenges than the Paraguayans had thus far experienced (with the possible exception of the Chaco).

Caballero never felt safe amidst so much foliage. He continued to press forward on a series of forced marches in which no one had anything to eat save for some charqui. He eventually arrived at the Arroyo Hondo, a short distance from a ranch that had belonged to the late Benigno López. The soldiers prepared a billet for the Marshal's family members but could not have tarried very long at the task, for Allied cavalry units were fast approaching. On 20 August, before he could reach Santaní, Caballero was overtaken by Allied horsemen who burst out of thick woods with the sun to their backs. As they waited for other units to arrive, an Argentine colonel sent across a surrender demand under a flag of truce. Hoping to buy time, the Paraguayans assembled a team of negotiators. The Marshal suggested a ruse by which Colonel Centurión, as head of the team, would brandish a pistol and take the enemy representatives prisoner at gunpoint. Luckily for the colonel, who was none too keen on the idea, López soon abandoned the notion as unworkable.<sup>57</sup>

The next day the Allies easily swept the position, subduing the Paraguayan troopers after a half hour's fight. Marshal López, as always, got away. So did Caballero.<sup>58</sup> Many of the soldiers who accompanied the two enjoyed no such luck. This left some four to five hundred Paraguayans dead or wounded on the field. Despite their threat to take no prisoners, the Allies did care for the

injured, and afterwards sent many captives down the line towards Pirayú.<sup>59</sup> The Brazilians also captured five small cannon, a few remaining provisions, and an entire caravan of wagons and oxcarts that carried la Madama's personal baggage and that of former *fiscal* José Falcón.<sup>60</sup> The Allies lost fourteen men killed and seven wounded, one of whom was the same Argentine colonel who had tried to offer the Paraguayans an honorable way to surrender.<sup>61</sup>

On 23 August, the Marshal finally arrived at San Estanislao, where he expected to set up a long-term refuge just as he had at Itá Ybaté and Azcurra. It was a minuscule village, not much better than a clearing in the forest. The soldiers, no longer young despite their tender age, quietly set up camp within an orange orchard. Their morale was at an all-time low, and because of desertions and recent skirmishes, manpower had declined dramatically. To use a modern term, though, Marshal López was still living in denial. He gloried in moments of difficulty, for in his experience such challenges always preceded something better. At Humaitá and Lomas Valentinas, when things looked darkest for his people, his world actually seemed to improve. He could still point to his army and call it a cohesive force. The troops had accomplished the passage from Caraguatay, and now he expected the pursuing Allies to stumble as on so many previous occasions.

The Marshal's optimism (or wishful thinking) may have brought him some personal gratification but it was delusional. Sources of support for the Paraguayans had vanished and in the absence of fresh troops and supplies, any military operations were foredoomed to failure. López, however, still counted on the ineptitude of his enemies. He had never ceased to dismiss the *kambáes* as poor soldiers, and since the fall of Asunción, he had repeatedly mistaken serious Allied maneuvers for indecision or bewilderment. He underestimated both his opponents' resources and resolve and he kept trying to apply to this new state of affairs the lessons learned when his army was still young. He presumed, for instance, that the enemy units would run afoul of the terrain the deeper they penetrated into eastern Paraguay. He also misread the recent turn in politics, thinking that the Brazilians could no longer trust Emilio Mitre's Argentines or that coterie of traitors operating in Asunción.

The Marshal reasoned that he had time to gather supplies and he sent out parties to reconnoiter the territory west to Concepción, where he hoped to seize every head of cattle that might have eluded earlier round ups. These foraging details had twenty to thirty men led by an officer and followed by a wagon to collect all provisions acquired. This often involved not only taking manioc from storage sheds, but pulling it up by the root while still in the field. The officer would know which route the main Paraguayan column was following and would rejoin the force by the evening hours to send the supplies on to San Estanislao.

Marshal López now took the opportunity to promote half a dozen officers to senior rank. He likewise rewarded several of the chaplains, including Father

Maíz, with the National Order of Merit.<sup>62</sup> And he designated San Isidro de Curuguaty, a village even further north, the new provisional capital, sending Francisco Sánchez ahead to instruct local officials to prepare for the army's arrival.<sup>63</sup> The vice president brought orders for local laborers to sow community fields with maize and other food crops. Even here, however, state infrastructure was severely decayed and Sánchez and the other officials could not hope to comply. The Marshal remained adamant, nonetheless; he expected to make war again in short order, and neither his officers nor his civilian functionaries, nor even Madame Lynch, tried to convince him otherwise.

Back at Caraguatay, the Brazilians had settled in. Their commander, the Count d'Eu, may have looked like a boy but he acted like a seasoned commander. While still getting organized, he received a visit from José Díaz de Bedoya, one of the new triumvirs, who brought news of the establishment of the provisional government and the promise of future collaboration.<sup>64</sup> Gaston had less interest in new political questions than in finishing the old campaign, which he feared might degenerate into rural anarchy. In normal circumstances, once an army guts an enemy, the latter surrenders as a matter of course. Allied triumphs in the Cordillera had demonstrated the necessary supremacy, yet the Marshal still refused to yield. Would the count have to exterminate all the remaining Paraguayans? Or perhaps he might simply declare victory and go home (as Caxias had done), leaving the Marshal to be liquidated by the triumvirs as a common bandit.

The situation must have eaten at Gaston. The Marshal, he knew, could never mount another attack, nor even put together a limited holding action. Every day brought proofs of Paraguayan disintegration. The refugees who crowded along the trails to Asunción included not just women and children but starving deserters from the Paraguayan army. First they came as individuals, then in groups of ten or more, and now, seemingly, by the hundreds. This ought to have reassured the count. But he could not be comfortable in the role of a policeman chasing a gang of ill-kempt banditti. He had little patience for this ignominious sort of war-making, and was angry that Rio de Janeiro had provided so little material support. He dispatched numerous letters to the war minister asking to withdraw the bulk of his troops, who were terribly fatigued, and whose presence seemed superfluous.<sup>65</sup>

While waiting for some specific reply (a rejection that was predictably slow in coming), the count busied himself with the never-ending question of supply. On 22 August, his vanguard units lost track of Caballero's retreating forces. Since the number of near-lame animals in the Allied cavalry prevented any immediate pursuit into the forests, he reluctantly ordered the soldiers back to Caraguatay.<sup>66</sup> There they joined Argentine cavalry units, Brazilian infantry, and some five hundred Paraguayan prisoners who had defected over the previous two weeks.

These men drew on his available supplies in a way that the count could not have planned for.<sup>67</sup> The logistical demands of the Allied armies had always been greater than those of the enemy. The war had mostly been fought on Paraguayan soil, where the Marshal enjoyed interior lines. The invading Allied armies, by contrast, had to depend on complicated supply networks, river transport, and the dispatch of wagon trains into unfamiliar territory. Making this system work had taxed Caxias, who supposedly enjoyed support from the imperial war minister (and from Urquiza as purveyor of horses and livestock). For the Count d'Eu, who faced an imperial government anxious to declare the war at an end, it was nearly impossible.

Obtaining adequate numbers of horses remained the most pressing problem, just as it had been for Mitre and the marquis. Gaston had even heard rumors that the Argentines had solved some of their own supply problems by making nightly forays into the Brazilian corrals.<sup>68</sup> Whether or not this story was true, the absence of mounts clearly compounded the count's headaches, for just when his men seemed ready to pounce on López, their horses went lame.<sup>69</sup>

Then there was the problem of provisions. Bonaparte had always insisted that armies live off the land, thus permitting more freedom for maneuver through a lack of dependence on supply columns. The Count d'Eu could never afford such a tactic, for the enemy had already stripped the country clean. Gaston's troops saw their own rations cut in half, and, for the moment, could obtain nothing save palm hearts and charqui. The contracts with Lanús and other purveyors had lapsed and Gaston could think of no immediate solution, so he told his men to forage where he knew they would find nothing to eat.<sup>70</sup> He no longer had sardines to share with them.

The count was livid and evidently leaning closer to a nervous depression. He was pressed simultaneously by Paranhos and others who had no idea what the front looked like but who insisted on prompt, unambiguous victory.<sup>71</sup> Gaston could not show them his indignation, for he needed their support. But it was difficult for him to appear patient. Perhaps the Marshal intended something like a protracted guerrilla struggle, even though such a course was beyond his limited means. But the count could ill afford to be dismissive of the possibility.

If the troops on the Allied side were hungry, the privations experienced by their Paraguayan quarry can scarcely be imagined. There was little energy left in soldiers who generally got by on a diminishing ration of dried beef, maize, edible thistles, and bitter oranges (which at least staved off scurvy).<sup>72</sup> Yet, even in this extremity, López demanded loyalty and further sacrifices. The Allied leaders in Asunción remained convinced that he would ultimately turn west to Bolivia and leave his long-suffering soldiers to the vicissitudes of the forest—further proof that, even now, the Allies clearly did not know their enemy.<sup>73</sup> The Marshal had no intention of leaving Paraguay.