



**THE PARAGUAYAN WAR**  
**Causes and Early Conduct**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**  
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ISBN 978-1-55238-994-2

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## Conclusion

### *The End of the Beginning*

Francisco Solano López's decision to invade Brazil and Argentina was based on hurt pride, the desire to rectify borders, and the fear that Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro were moving dangerously close to realizing their national goals in the Plata. If Bartolomé Mitre and the Brazilians had their way, he maintained, they would soon eliminate all regional rivals, his own country included. They would then divide Paraguay and the Banda Oriental between them. That the two giants would inevitably clash with each other was a logical inference, and López doubted this result not for a moment. By the time Brazil and Argentina came to blows, however, it would probably be too late. His nation — the Republic of Paraguay — would already have ceased to exist.

Historians have reproached Solano López for his many miscalculations, but his intuition on this occasion was correct. The Brazilians did harbor hegemonic ambitions in the Plata. Mitre's cohort did wish to consolidate *porteño* rule in Argentina irrespective of the price. Given these inclinations, the marshal thought it wiser to attack without delay, using the army to smash his enemies before they smashed him. Afterward, he could reestablish a balance of power in the Plata while guaranteeing the security of his nation. Seen in this light, the Paraguayan offensive of 1864–65 was less the product of one man's wild ambition than of a traditional, broadly felt fear of encirclement.

In choosing the path to war, Solano López eschewed another stance

that was likewise grounded in the Paraguayan historical experience: the willingness to implicitly support Brazil against Argentina or vice versa. Dr. José Gaspar de Francia had adopted this strategy when he left the door partly open to Brazilian trade in the 1820s and 1830s. Carlos Antonio López did much the same two decades later, siding first with Justo José de Urquiza and the empire in displacing Juan Manuel de Rosas, then countering Brazilian pretensions at Fêcho-dos-Morros.

Appearing to side with one power and then with another had served Paraguayan interests well over the years. But Solano López had different ideas for his country. In this, he was encouraged by Vásquez Sagastume and other Blanco agents, who needed all possible assistance to repel the invaders of Uruguay. They argued that Paraguay had a pivotal role in restoring the proper order of things in the Plata. In a sense, they were right, for Paraguay's model of nationhood included strict and powerful links between the leader and the masses — links that had a traditional basis and that other people in the Plata might well understand and emulate. If they did, then all of Mitre's plans for a greater Argentina might fail, and all of Brazil's pretensions in the region might be frustrated.

In any case, López himself was soon repeating the same words as his Uruguayan supplicants. He urged his people to prepare for the worst. And it came. Mitre's thinly disguised support of Venancio Flores followed by Brazil's invasion of Uruguay in September 1864 pushed the Paraguayan leader over the edge.

Rescuing his allies in the Lower Plata involved much more than words. Militarily, Paraguay was the best organized, though clearly not the strongest, of all the contending countries. The marshal, who fancied himself a first-rate general, had spent the better part of a decade adding to his military infrastructure, purchasing warships, and training his troops. He assumed that Paraguayan armies could vanquish the Allies, all the while giving heart to thousands of Correntinos, Entrerrianos, and Uruguayans who would rally to the common cause.

Solano López was certainly right in thinking that the Litoral provinces harbored many potential allies. The Paraguayan seizure of Mato Grosso brought nothing but praise in that quarter, and such regional

figures as Victor Silvero and Ricardo López Jordan confidently expected to see their own people join the Paraguayan army as it marched south to Paysandú and Montevideo. Even Urquiza inclined in favor of Solano López — or so it seemed at the time.

Having taken the lands north of the Apa River, the marshal hesitated over his next move. Thus far, his government was still at peace with Buenos Aires. This fact suggested two possible approaches: either do nothing and allow Argentine neutrality to shield Paraguay from any Brazilian invasion by way of the river, or attack immediately — probably through the Misiones — into Rio Grande and finally on to Uruguay. The first option had much to recommend it, for the empire had no hope of mounting an overland invasion of Paraguay in the immediate future; López might even retain his prize in Mato Grosso. But if he failed to move, then he ran the risk of leaving his Uruguayan allies — and perhaps Urquiza — in the lurch. If Paraguay wished to play its proper role in the Plata, then sooner or later he had to take the offensive.

The marshal's plan was ambitious but not insane. Its slender logic rested for the most part on the resilience of the Blanco Party in Uruguay and on the putative support of Argentine "allies" in the intervening territory. Yet, to paraphrase Proudhon, the fecundity of the unexpected far exceeds the statesman's prudence; when Solano López did eventually drive south, he missed his opportunity by three months. Paysandú had fallen. Flores had assumed the presidency at Montevideo. And, for better or worse, Urquiza had cast his lot with the national government.

Compounding the political difficulties this new situation presented for Paraguay was the marshal's major strategic blunder: rather than attack Brazil by way of the Misiones, he ordered Gen. Wenceslao Robles to seize the port of Corrientes. Its invasion swiftly drove Argentina into an alliance with the empire and left the people of the Litoral with no real alternative to Mitre's leadership.

Solano López followed this decision with one misstep after another. To begin with, he never clarified his overall objective to his subordinate commanders but instead left them to ponder his next move. He then divided his army into two columns that were incapable of mutual sup-



port. He entrusted command of these two columns to weak (and in the case of Antonio de la Cruz Estigarribia, incompetent) officers who failed utterly to inspire their men or rise above the challenges of their mission. The marshal further hampered their movements by issuing detailed instructions from which they dared not deviate. They could neither advance nor maneuver without specific orders from Humaitá, which was several days away by steamer or coach.

Poor strategy translated into poor performance in the field. Unnecessary delays, misplacement of advance columns and reconnaissance units, and impossible defensive postures all followed one upon the other with devastating effects for Paraguay. In addition, Gen. Wenceslao Paunero's raid of 25 May on Corrientes upset Solano López's timetable for advancing to the south. His subsequent decision to withdraw in order to guard against further raids confused his field commanders even more.

The marshal conceived one opportunity for strategic innovation — at the Riachuelo. But his ineffectual naval commander squandered his chance for a surprise victory by attacking several hours late and by failing to eliminate a Brazilian picket ship before it gave the alarm. The Paraguayans then steamed well past the imperial fleet instead of coming alongside for the assault. Though the Brazilians reacted with confusion at first, in the end, the ill-considered Paraguayan maneuver gave Adm. Francisco Barroso the time he needed to move decisively. His destruction of Capt. Pedro Ignacio Meza's flotilla ended Paraguay's hopes of major offensive action on the river and basically limited the marshal to land operations thereafter.

For all of the skill that Barroso displayed at the battle of the Riachuelo, the Allies also made many mistakes. Neither Argentina nor Brazil had ever fought a sustained military operation over such a wide area. Neither country managed to mobilize its troops effectively. The Argentines were completely unprepared for the attack of 13 April and lost nearly all their small fleet in consequence. They then watched helplessly as a key town of their northeastern provinces came under foreign rule. The only bright spot in the national government's defense came

from Paunero's 25 May raid and from Gen. Nicanor Cáceres, Col. Simeón Paiva, and Col. Isidoro Reguera, who effected maximum delay against the Paraguayan columns advancing south. Their exertions gave Mitre the time he needed to raise, organize, and train his land forces for a counterattack.

In the beginning, the Brazilians matched the Argentines in their poor defense. Though the Riograndenses had the advantage of being on their home ground, their operations against the Paraguayans were consistently sluggish with no obvious direction or unity of command. As a result, from São Borja through Uruguaiana, the Paraguayans encountered little resistance. Only at Mbutuí did the gaúchos mount a successful assault, and on that occasion, they greatly outnumbered the enemy. Apologists might suggest that the Brazilians planned to lure the Paraguayans into an isolated position far from any hope of support. In fact, the Brazilians failed to attack because of the numbers against them and because they could not coordinate their units in time. Instead of closing with the Uruguay Division, they argued among themselves. Lt. Floriano Peixoto's courageous actions on the river confounded Paraguayan communications across the Uruguay, but it could not make up for the poor generalship the Brazilians displayed in Rio Grande.

Estigarribia's own lack of initiative at Uruguaiana was palpable. It rested on three factors: the fatigue of his men, the lack of supplies, and the absence of orders from Humaitá. Every day the colonel hesitated, the Allies grew stronger. Soon it became impossible to contemplate a dash into the supposedly friendly Banda Oriental. Escape northward was also ruled out. Estigarribia's spirits sunk even lower when word came that Venancio Flores had crushed Maj. Pedro Duarte's command at the Yataí. When the Paraguayans surrendered after a siege of several weeks, it came as no surprise to anyone save Solano López.

By October 1865 Mitre had constructed a large, if untried, army at Concordia. Though it represented many different and oftentimes conflicting interests, this force was more formidable than all of the Paraguayan units left in Corrientes. Yet for a variety of reasons, Mitre delayed its deployment against Gen. Francisco Resquín. The Argentine

president left the real fighting to Cáceres and his guerrillas and instead gave full attention to the broader organization of the Allied army. The Correntino irregulars had carried much of the burden of defense thus far. They were intrepid enough to harass the Southern Division and keep Resquín guessing, but General Cáceres never deceived himself into thinking that his men alone could defeat such a force.

Only the imperial navy had the power and the opportunity to gain a decisive advantage by closing the Paraguayan escape route from Corrientes. Yet Admiral Tamandaré adopted a policy that kept his warships even with the line of Allied advance on the land. To be sure, Brazilian vessels did steam forward at the last juncture but then refused to challenge Resquín's crossing of the Paraná. They thereby assured more trouble for Allied forces in the future. The failure to engage the Paraguayans at Paso de la Patria ranked as the single worst mistake the Allies made during the early phases of the war.

Success in Corrientes did not bring a comprehensive victory over the Paraguayans. Their army was, after all, anything but defeated. Humaitá loomed as the greatest defensive complex in the region, and if it were not impregnable, it surely looked the part. Not a single observer believed that Humaitá would fall without a dramatic Allied assault, something far more massive, far more intense, than anything thus far contemplated.

Gaining this new objective involved political as well as military costs, and no one expected the alliance between the national government and the empire to function smoothly. The Argentine soldiers distrusted their Brazilian comrades and each other; at any time, Mitre's army was likely to splinter into its constituent parts, as the mutinies at Basualdo and Toledo demonstrated. The Brazilians, for their part, were just as suspicious of the men from Buenos Aires. Manoel Luiz Osório and the other generals chafed under Mitre's direction. Many of their soldiers felt homesick, and it was a long way back to São Paulo, Rio, or Recife. The one thing certain about the alliance was that every party intended to pursue its own interests.

As for the marshal, he could take comfort in the loyalty of his



men. The Allies were badly mistaken if they thought that these thrice-whipped soldiers were resigned to their defeat. On the contrary, what the Paraguayans lacked in dash and fire they more than made up for in constancy and in their willingness to bear up under the most trying conditions. There was a psychology of extremes: *¡Vencer o morir! ¡Independencia o muerte!* Like the Japanese or the Norsemen, the Paraguayans detested the battle half-won as much as the outright defeat — and there remained much for them to do. In this the marshal understood his countrymen far better than did Mitre or Emperor Pedro II. Except for the Uruguay Division, the Paraguayan army was intact, and its men were ready for whatever eventuality. Throughout the country, the people were united behind their president; his war aims — now that the army was back on Paraguayan soil — seemed concrete, personal, and intimate to them. Solano López controlled the southern Mato Grosso with its difficult but potentially important overland route to Bolivia. And he controlled his people. This was all that he needed for the time being, for Paraguay, as he well knew, would endure, come what may.