

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 13
Who owns Iquitos?

c/o American Embassy
Quito
Ecuador
February 21, 1956

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Ecuadorian newspapers of the last week have reported that the Army Garrison of Iquitos in Peru, isolated in its hot, low, green segment of the Amazon Basin, is in revolt against the government of General Odría, ensconced some 1200 kilometers away in the busy white presidential palace of Lima. In the first part of the communiqué issued by the rebels, the uprising was said to be in the name of the people of Peru who have been deceived by an enterprising dictator. In the latter part of the communiqué, a rather different motive appeared: "We object to politics in the life of the Armed Services, and General Odría has consistently meddled in the internal affairs of the Army."

Although this might strike some observers as a peculiar complaint since the General is both president of the nation and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and should thereby have full justification for treating the Army in line with what he conceives the national interest to be, this sort of pronouncement is a standard item in the repertory of military revolts against existing regimes in Latin American countries. Some of the Latins I know suggest that all of these grievance phrases simply cover a desire for personal power on the part of those who strike against authority - "They feel that their pockets can be even fuller if they have control of the national funds."

In a letter I received from Peru, it was said that the revolt might be a false one, planned by Odría and his aides, so that the government could impose a state of siege, attack directly such thorns in its side as the Lima daily LA PRENSA and its ram-bunctious editor, Pedro Beltrán, and prepare in advance of the June elections an excuse to postpone the latter. It is true that Beltrán and some of his staff were arrested immediately, that LA PRENSA has ceased appearing (according to a government report because "it doesn't feel like it") and that yesterday the government said that it has proof that Beltrán and Pedro Roselló, leader of the Coalición Nacional (CRT - 11), are involved in the uprising. "There

are proofs and we are going to present them in the courts."

Since the news of the Peruvian uprising first appeared, I have been listening to Ecuadorian reactions to the events. I thought that they would be especially interesting, not only because of the confused interpretations of the revolt, but also because Ecuador is to have elections this year, a fact which has evoked the specter of a coup to maintain President Velasco Ibarra in power, despite the recent open nominating conventions and the current campaigning by candidates of various parties. It came as a surprise to me that Ecuadorian comment should be less concerned with the implications for its own future governing than with the possible changes in the power relations between Ecuador and Peru, with the often expressed hope that this particular uprising (or one to grow out of it now or later) will create havoc in Peru of which Ecuador can take advantage. The advantage to be taken concerns the repossession of certain Amazon territory, including, coincidentally enough, the city of Iquitos.

The fact that the Iquitos revolt is directed against General Odría has provided a particular satisfaction to many Ecuadorians who remember him as the leader of the northern garrisons which defeated Ecuadorian forces in 1941, during a short war provoked, depending upon one's nationality, by the other side. Out of this defeat came the Protocol of Rio de Janeiro (1942), which assigned to Peru large tracts of montaña land (called the Oriente in Ecuador) formerly owned by Ecuador and placed Iquitos under Peruvian control. This city has since been labeled "Ecuador's natural port to the Atlantic Ocean," and its loss magnified into a national disaster. This despite Ecuador's pre-1942 lethargy with regard to the ceded territory, during which time Iquitos was settled and developed by Peruvians. However this may be, one of the widespread reactions to the Peruvian uprising is that Odría is at last getting his just due. "It's almost as if God has stepped back to our side," I was told a few days ago.

A taxi driver said to me: "Anyone like Odría who treated the Ecuadorian soldiers so barbarously during '41 couldn't expect to last as president," (General Odría came to power in 1948). A university student agreed, but added, with a rush to general principles: "This is the fate of all dictators: it's a blow for liberty." An hacienda owner hoped that the revolt would topple Odría, and leave Peru in such a state of confusion that "we might be able to demand a revision of the Protocol," (a slogan which is painted on many of the whitewashed walls of Quito). An Army officer asked me to remember that the Army, sometimes, and "against its will," has to play the guardian of the nation's best interests, and that for

this reason he has some sympathy with the rebels. When I asked if he didn't feel that selfish interests sometimes lay behind this military paternalism, he replied, "Perhaps in a country like Peru, but not here. Whatever the Army has had to do in the past has been for the public good."

This approval of the revolt, motivated in part by what Ecuador might get out of a Peruvian debacle, is balanced by another set of attitudes, concerned less with national expansion than with national security. A secondary school teacher wondered: "If Odría should fall and his civilian-military regime is discredited, I hate to think of how this precedent will be used in other South American countries." A clerk in a large industry was worried about the use to which Odría might put his armed forces if the uprising is put down. "Since it's a sign of general discontent in Peru, he'll probably send them against us to divert people's attention away from his government - which would make everyone in Peru happy: they hate us." Another kind of fear was expressed by the owner of a large firm in Quito. "If the situation in Peru gets out of hand, then it could develop into something resembling the Bolivian revolution of 1952. The Communists are always waiting for a likely chance anyway. As much as I'd like to see Odría fall, at least he knows enough to keep the indian in his place."

Whether warmed by satisfaction or chilled by fear, these Ecuadorians, and many others with whom I have talked, speak out of a mingled hostility and hatred of Peru, not unmixed with envy. This general attitude has been described by Emilio Romero, Peruvian geographer, economist and sometime diplomat, as follows: "...there is a huge shadow which darkens the Ecuadorian scene, and which projects itself over the horizons of America. This black shadow is the unhealthy and sick hatred which Ecuador cultivates, directs and exalts against Peru." He wrote this in a book, Por el Norte: Ecuador (Through the North: Ecuador), which is otherwise appreciate of the "northern neighbor." Romero has also referred to this feeling as a "national psychosis."

The Ecuadorian rejects this charge, and points out that Peru has gobbled up "weaker" Ecuador's national territory without any other provocation than that of greed. "Of course we have to be afraid of Peru: it's just like living next door to a house of tarantulas." And: "Romero is just like any other Peruvian. He has to try and justify unjustifiable actions so he shifts the blame to us. If anyone has a national psychosis it's the Peruvians who want to be the rulers of all the Andes."

But, whatever Peru's motives might be, Peruvian actions vis-à-vis Ecuador are treated with suspicion, emotion and sometimes near hysteria. Last year, the Ecuadorian representative in the United Nations complained of "hostile" troop maneuvers on the still undemarcated frontier with Peru (which has been under survey since 1942, but remains uncertain due to the inability of the two governments to agree to any conclusion). That the observers sent by the UN to check on this claim reported negative results seemingly failed to calm public opinion here. "The Peruvians just managed to withdraw their troops in time."

To many people in Ecuador it was only the forthright action of their leaders at home and abroad which avoided another Peruvian invasion. "I suppose that the Peruvians feel that Quito is necessary to their security against Colombia, and will try to take it sooner or later." The newspapers and government speeches during this period made quite a to-do of the alleged maneuvers, and one more black mark was entered in the "long history of Peruvian aggression against our peaceful country."

Yesterday, I returned to talk with a lively young lady, a clerk in a Quito bookshop, who earlier, after learning that I had just come from Peru, asked me: "And what do you think of the Peruvians? Do you know that they stole Iquitos from us?" She defended this proposition with three history texts and an historical atlas, which showed that Iquitos had been in Ecuadorian territory until 1941. She was well aware that it, and most of the Oriente ceded in 1942, had been largely neglected by the government.

"But it's not that: Ecuador has a rightful historical claim to Iquitos. Didn't Gonzalo Pizarro and Orellana leave Quito, not Lima, with Ecuadorian Indians in 1541 when they claimed the Amazon for Spain? And wasn't Atahualpa killed by Francisco Pizarro in 1533, the last of the Inca rulers, a citizen of Quito? Oh, yes, what the Peruvian doesn't understand is that there has to be fair play in international relations." This line of reasoning struck me rather as if Mexico were to lay claim to Texas on the grounds that it once was under the "Mexican" Cortez who had taken it from the "Mexican" Montezuma.

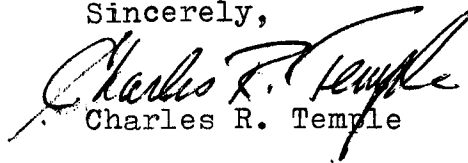
When I entered the store yesterday, I was greeted with a cheerful nod and the words, "Now, don't you think there's some justice in the world: it's the garrison in Iquitos which is revolting against Odría - just as if they were good Ecuadorians." I asked her if there was some magic in the air of Iquitos which transformed every person who went there into an Ecuadorian overnight, since already, in her reckoning, it had made citizens of Atahualpa, the Inca, and of Pizarro and Orellana, the Spaniards? "No. No magic. Iquitos is just

ours."

She introduced me to a friend of hers, a young man with a sad dark face, who said that he seconded the arguments already presented, and then went on to say: "I'm a man of peace, you understand, and wars are bad; but, this time, if there is chaos in Peru, Ecuador should take the opportunity to regain our lost territories. The blood of the people should sometimes be shed for the sake of the nation."

I left the shop after having bought another pamphlet on Ecuadorian history, this one claiming that the author presented "irrefutable evidence" that "Peruvian aggression has resulted in the stifling of Ecuador's growing economy by its deprecations in the Oriente." I thought that Odría has only to complete the traditional circle by asserting that Ecuadorian agents have incited the Iquitos revolt, and perhaps the question of Who owns Iquitos? might pass from the realm of discussion to an exchange of cannon, soldiers and the "blood of the people."

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple

Received New York 2/27/56.