

The real Amazon: Why Brazil will defend it

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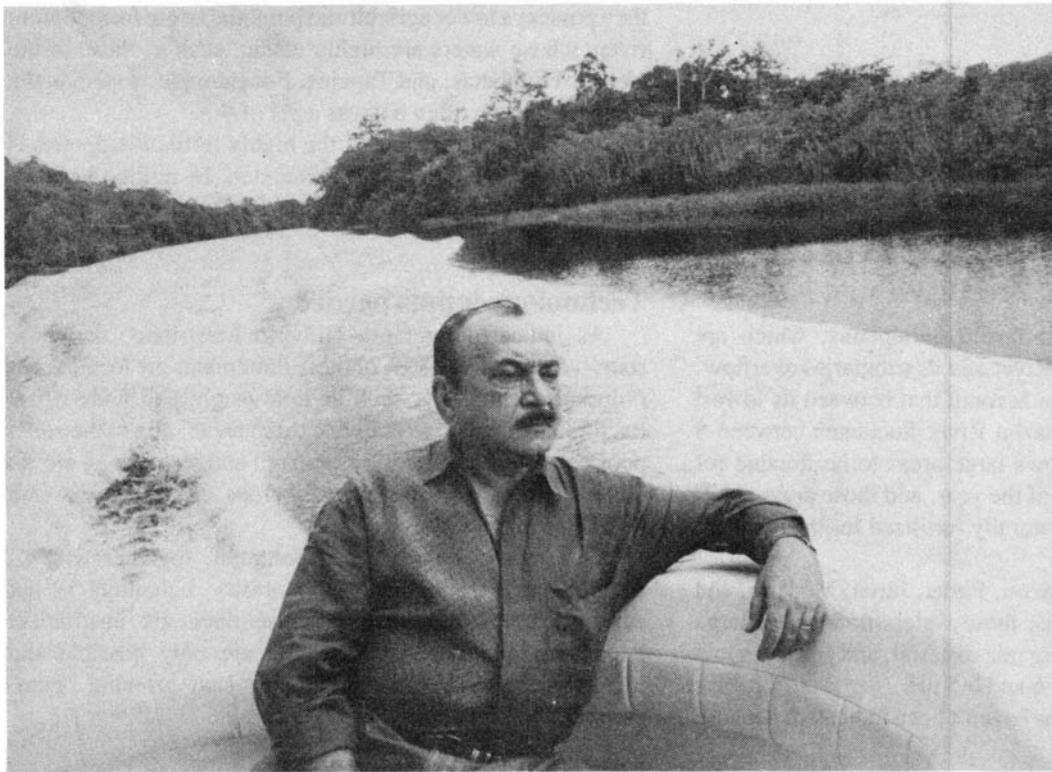
In discussing Anglo-American pressures to declare the Amazon “the patrimony of humanity,” a high-level officer of the Brazilian Armed Forces told us several months ago that “the Amazon is not Brazilian, it is Brazil.” During the same period, the Army commander of the Amazon region told congressmen that his institution was prepared to turn the region into a giant Vietnam, rather than share sovereignty with the powers behind the new world order. In 1989, in a study entitled *Vital Decade*, the Superior War College affirmed that the Brazilian state must be prepared to declare a “state of war” in the Amazon. The only military training center in the South American jungle is located in Manaus, the state capital of Amazonas.

When we visited Manaus to interview Gov. Gilberto Mestrinho, we confirmed for ourselves the existence of a strong nationalist sentiment among that vast region’s population. The Brazilian Amazon is one of the key factors around which the country’s national unity revolves. Two slogans seen at the Palacio Rio Negro, the seat of the state government, make this clear: “We stand here with open arms for all those who wish to come and work to continue belonging to Brazil,” and “It won’t be we, or our descendants, who will lower our heads to lose the Amazon.”

This was the reality that was ignored when Presidents George Bush and François Mitterrand, British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and the Anglo-Dutch monarchy began their campaign, under the pretext of preventing ecological disasters in the Amazon, to create an international enclave in the region overseen by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

In fact, these pressures on the Amazon were directly responsible for the rebirth of nationalism within the Brazilian Armed Forces. Ironically, the environmental fanaticism of U.S. Vice President Albert Gore, who as senator accused Brazil of committing environmental crimes, was one of the causes of that awakening, when both military and civilian institutions understood that Brazil, like Iraq, could become a target for destruction by the new world order.

However, this factor of national unity which the Amazon represents should



Gilberto Mestrinho, the governor of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, rejects the propaganda of the western "defenders" of the Amazon's Indians, whose aim is to keep the Indians backward: "If we want to provide protection to the Indians, we should protect those 2.6 million inhabitants who are Brazilian, and also children of God, who are fighting to develop this region and maintain its sovereignty."

not be confused with the conceptions of certain Brazilian geologists who, basing themselves on a physiocratic view, see the Amazon only as a repository of biological or forest-based raw materials to be exploited. This is the conception which powerful transnational economic groups have carefully cultivated, and which has led to crass errors in the Amazon's development strategy and demographic distribution. That strategy's most important symbol was the trans-Amazon highway, which is today virtually unusable and abandoned.

Powerful development potential

This is not to say that we defend the thesis of the Amazon's "untouchability," but rather that we understand that this symbol of national unity should become reality in the future through the political will to develop the region, taking into account its particular characteristics. With technologies currently available, the Amazon could support a population of minimally 50 million people. Today, living in precarious conditions, the population is barely one-fifth of that.

This goes to the heart of the establishment's true concern over the Amazon. Yes, they covet its wealth; but most fundamentally, they are horrified at the prospect of the growth potential of a sovereign Brazil, actively developing its resources. In 1974, the U.S. National Security Council issued a document—NSSM-200—which identified Brazil as one of 13 developing-sector nations whose population growth was deemed to be a "strategic threat" to the United States. It demanded that population control programs be imposed to

meet this alleged threat.

In briefly visiting the region through which the Amazon River and its tributaries run—known as *igarapes*, or natural canals which become lakes when the river rises—we realized that the Amazon is a gigantic infrastructural network of natural communications, in which the rivers are the roads. Where today there are a multitude of tourist services, such as gas stations, hotels, floating restaurants, in the future we should see a whole network of support services for agro-industrial, forestry, and mining activities.

As our interview with Governor Mestrinho shows, the region's agricultural potential is concentrated on the gigantic floodplains—approximately 18 million hectares—which the Amazon continuously fertilizes. Appropriate technology in the Amazon means light agricultural machinery and a transportation and warehousing network with specific shipments and perhaps floating silos.

This fabulous agricultural potential should be combined with a development strategy for mining-industrial poles to make use of the Amazon's extraordinary reserves. Additionally, recent discoveries of natural gas along the Juruá River demand the building of thermoelectric plants which will guarantee future energy supplies. This entire project must be coordinated by an institution which would centralize all scientific and technological efforts, as well as train skilled manpower, thinking of the Amazon's particular characteristics. This institution should join forces with similar institutions from neighboring Amazon countries.