

The Role of José M. Balmaceda in Preserving Argentine Neutrality in the War of the Pacific

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AFTER SEPARATING from Spain, the Latin American republics established boundaries similar to those within the Spanish Empire. These boundaries were vaguely defined and usually ran through deserted territories, so that when explorations opened up these areas, and economic interests appeared, disputes ensued between many of the republics. In fact, the history of nineteenth-century diplomatic relations within South America can be told largely in terms of vexing border disputes.

Chile's history is no exception. One major border controversy brought Chile into the War of the Pacific (1879-1883) against Bolivia and Peru, while another with Argentina threatened to bring the latter to the aid of Chile's opponents. The controversy which led to the War of the Pacific centered in the Atacama Desert, located on the west coast of South America in the desolate Peruvian and Bolivian provinces of Tacna, Arica, Tarapacá, and Antofagasta. Rich guano beds located there had great value as sources of nitrates, mineral salts, and fertilizers, and both Chilean and European industry showed interest in the area.¹

In 1866 Chile and Bolivia, under duress of a common danger, signed a treaty agreeing to the twenty-fourth parallel as Bolivia's southern boundary. At the same time they consented to share the proceeds from the mineral wealth lying between the twenty-third and twenty-fifth parallels, and Bolivia agreed to impose no export duties on Chilean guano.² This vague adjustment did not reduce the jealousy and distrust between the two countries, and they made a further attempt at a definite settlement in 1874 without success.³ Late

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¹ Isaac J. Cox, "Chile," in A. Curtis Wilgus (ed.), *Argentina, Brazil, and Chile Since Independence* (New York, 1935), 336; R. Nelson Boyd, *Chile: Sketches of Chili and the Chilians During the War, 1879-1880* (London, 1881), 195-196.

² Robert N. Burr, *By Reason or Force: Chile and the Balancing of Power in South America, 1830-1905* (Berkeley, 1965), 119; Cox, "Chile," 338.

³ Aquiles Vergara Vicuña, *Bolivia y Chile: Lecciones del Pasado* (La Paz, 1936), 199-203.

in 1878 Bolivia imposed a tax upon all nitrate exports, a move which Chile protested as violating the treaty of 1866. Bolivia nevertheless persisted and caused the property of non-paying companies to be advertised for forced sales. Meanwhile in 1873 Peru and Bolivia signed a secret treaty which guaranteed the territorial integrity of both nations and cemented an alliance between them in case of war.⁴ Chile, upon discovering the treaty's existence, alleged that it was directed against her and demanded a proclamation of neutrality, which was refused.

In mid-February 1879 Chilean forces invaded Bolivia, initiating the sanguinary War of the Pacific.⁵ The outbreak of hostilities caused Chile to consider ways of settling a boundary dispute with her other neighbor, for it was known in Santiago that two years earlier Argentina had received an invitation to join the hostile Peru-Bolivian alliance.⁶ To keep Argentina neutral now became a *sine qua non* of Chilean policy.

As with the problem of the Atacama desert, the colonial inheritance of vague boundaries had complicated relations between Chile and Argentina. Their dispute began in 1843 when Chile showed her keen interest in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego by founding Punta Arenas, a port and fortress intended to dominate the Strait of Magellan. This interest must have seemed all the more menacing to the Argentines, since with the development of steam navigation Chile was establishing commercial connections with Europe and the United States. Buenos Aires protested the establishment of Punta Arenas, claiming all of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego as her own. From 1876 to 1878 various conferences were held and proposals of settlement exchanged, but to no avail.⁷

⁴ Edmundo Civati Bernasconi, *Guerra del Pacífico, 1879-1883* (2 vols., Buenos Aires, 1941), I, 52; Vergara Vicuña, *Bolivia y Chile*, 197-199. For documents on the treaty of 1873 see J. M. Echenique Gandarillas, *El Tratado Secreto de 1873, su documentación* (Santiago de Chile, 1921).

⁵ Documents concerning the outbreak of the war are contained in Pedro Yrigoyen, *La Alianza Peru-Boliviano-Argentina y la declaratoria de guerra de Chile* (Lima, 1921), and Pascual Ahumada Moreno, *Guerra del Pacífico . . .* (Valparaíso, 1884). The standard works on Chilean-United States relations during the entire Tacna-Arica question are Henry C. Evans, *Chile and its Relations with the United States* (Durham, 1927), and Herbert Millington, *American Diplomacy and the War of the Pacific* (New York, 1948). See also Alice F. Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine* (Hamden, Conn., 1965), 107-127, and William J. Dennis, *Tacna and Arica* (New Haven, 1931), 61ff.

⁶ Clements R. Markham, *The War Between Peru and Chile* (London, 1883), 86.

⁷ A summary of the boundary dispute between Chile and Argentina is found in Robert G. Talbott, "The Chilean Boundary in The Strait of Magellan," *HABR*, XLVII (November 1967), 519-531. See also Gordon Ireland, *Boundaries*,

Wishing to dominate the disputed area, Argentina gave foreigners permission to extract guano from Patagonia, and in two instances during 1878 two ships, the *Devonshire* and the *Jeanne Amélie*, had been stopped by Chilean authorities. Buenos Aires newspapers were filled with bellicose accusations, but Argentina avoided war, realizing that she lacked a navy capable of meeting Chile's fleet on even terms. Nonetheless, both nations sent squadrons into the disputed area, while Argentine President Nicolás Avellaneda sought to build up his navy.⁸

This unsettled background led to a convention concluded on December 6, 1878, between the Chilean Minister of Foreign Relations, Alejandro Fierro, and the Argentine consul in Valparaíso, Mariano E. de Sarratea. This agreement, overwhelmingly ratified by the Chilean Congress and formally approved by President Aníbal Pinto, provided for a settlement in the near future and the existence of the status quo for a fourteen-month period.⁹ Avellaneda, however, subscribed to the pact unwillingly and only by necessity. Peruvian legislative documents reveal that he would not have approved the negotiations had he been successful in obtaining a warship from Peru. Peru, however, had mobilized her fleet, and her warships, the *Blanco* and *Cochrane*, were already in Chilean waters.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Argentine Senate refused to ratify the agreement, understandably seeking advantages from Chile's involvement.¹¹ Moreover, the Argentine press displayed a definite hostility toward Chile and a marked sympathy for Bolivia.¹²

Thus when war with Bolivia and Peru flared, Chilean President Pinto and Foreign Minister Domingo Santa María decided to send a special emissary to Buenos Aires to secure the ratification of the Fierro-Sarratea Convention and keep Argentina from joining Bolivia and Peru. For these ends Chile was now willing to offer almost any concessions. Pinto entrusted the mission to José Manuel Balma

Possessions, and Conflicts in South America (Cambridge, 1938), 20-22. Cf. Luis E. Délano, *Balmaceda, político romántico* (Santiago, 1937), 50; Gonzalo Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico* (3 vols., Valparaíso, 1911-1919), II, 439-440.

⁸ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 440.

⁹ José M. Yrarrázaval Larraín, *El Presidente Balmaceda* (2 vols., Santiago, de Chile, 1940), I, 207; Isidoro Ruiz-Moreno, *Historia de las relaciones exteriores argentinas, 1810-1955* (Buenos Aires, 1961), 276-277; Thomas O. Osborn to William Evarts, December 12, 1878, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations for 1878* (Washington, 1879), 14.

¹⁰ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 441.

¹¹ Robert N. Burr, *The Stillborn Panama Congress: Power Politics and Chilean-Colombian Relations During the War of the Pacific* (Berkeley, 1962), 33-34; Francisco A. Encina, *Historia de Chile: desde la prehistoria hasta 1891* (20 vols., Santiago de Chile, 1940-1954), XVI, 502.

¹² Burr, *Stillborn Panama Congress*, 34; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 502-503.

ceda, who had played a leading role in the discussion of the boundary question during both private and public sessions of the Chilean chamber, and designated him Chilean minister plenipotentiary to Buenos Aires.¹³

Balmaceda, born thirty-eight years earlier in Santiago, has left his name etched in Chilean annals as few other statesmen have. He early pursued studies for the priesthood, but renounced a religious career upon coming in contact with the scientific and literary ideas of the Enlightenment. Wealthy, gifted as a public speaker, and distinguished in personal appearance, he served as a private secretary to President Manuel Montt at the American Congress at Lima in 1865. Subsequently Balmaceda became a copublisher of *La Libertad* and also became associated with the Club de la Reforma. During the decade preceding his delicate mission to Buenos Aires, he continued to write and was active in Congress.

Balmaceda's views on public affairs indicate the direction of Chilean liberalism in the late nineteenth century. Arguing from the Positivist assumptions that technical and scientific blueprints could be applied to society, he called for a critical analysis of Chilean life for the welfare of the nation. Desiring greatness for his country and himself, the future president was very conscious of his role in the development of Chile.¹⁴

When he learned of his appointment on March 3, 1879, Balmaceda hesitated to leave the country. Having inherited a large estate on the outskirts of Santiago a short time before, he had invested nearly his entire fortune in a prodigious irrigation project which reflected his idealistic and somewhat impractical nature. He had hoped to sell irrigation privileges to landholders in the vicinity, but when the effects of the worldwide panic of 1873 struck Chile, he was unable to pay several outstanding loans and had to resort to loansharks for the money. Despite his financial difficulties, he agreed to assume a "sufficiently parliamentary" position and leave his problems in the hands

¹³ Thomas O. Osborn to William Evarts, May 3, 1879, U. S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations for 1879* (Washington, 1880), 20-21, quoted in Maury A. Bromsen, "The Rise of José M. Balmaceda: A Chilean President's Background," (M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1941), 77.

¹⁴ Biographical material on Balmaceda may be obtained from the Bromsen thesis. See also Luis Galdames, *A History of Chile* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 341-350; Julio Bañados-Espinosa, *Balmaceda, su gobierno y la Revolución de 1891* (2 vols., Santiago, 1941); Joaquim Nabuco, *Balmaceda. . .* (São Paulo, 1895); Fredrick B. Pike, *Chile and the United States, 1880-1962: The Emergence of Chile's Social Crisis and the Challenge to United States Diplomacy* (Notre Dame, 1963), 40-41; Yrarrázaval Larraín, *El Presidente Balmaceda*.

of a friendly broker.¹⁵ A five-man mission left Santiago on March 19: Balmaceda, his brother Ramón, secretaries Adolfo Carrasco Albano and Guillermo Puelma Tupper, and a prominent Santiago winegrower, Cornelio Saavedra Rivera, who had many friends in Buenos Aires. Travelling overland, the party arrived in Buenos Aires on March 29.¹⁶

Although the outbreak of war was still unknown in Buenos Aires, Balmaceda and his colleagues realized that it would greatly complicate their negotiations. For one thing they would have to counteract the impression that Chile was an aggressor. During the early fighting Chile had sought to prevent Peru and Bolivia from obtaining the aid of non-belligerent nations. Recognizing that Peru, her traditional adversary, was the more powerful member of the alliance, Chile even tried to detach Bolivia from Peru, offering help in seizing the Peruvian province of Arica, through which Bolivian commerce had passed since independence. However, Bolivian dictator Hilarión Daza would have nothing of the scheme.¹⁷ Indeed, it was reported in Buenos Aires that Daza had "sworn by the beard of his father and his own to boot, that he would drive [the] Chilean invaders from [Bolivian] soil."¹⁸

When the Chilean mission arrived in Buenos Aires, Balmaceda learned that the Argentine government would probably reject the Fierro-Sarratea convention because of the prevailing popular sentiment against Chile. Some of this hostility resulted from an earlier arbitration in which Chile had awarded part of the Chaco to Paraguay.¹⁹ A strong, vociferous, anti-Chilean party in Congress, recalling the *Devonshire* and *Jeanne Amélie* incidents, also turned public opinion against the agreement.²⁰ Finally, political dissension caused by approaching Argentine provincial elections suggested that the settlement of the Patagonian question might depend less on its merits than on the personalities of Argentine politicians. Opponents of Chile organized a patriotic society led by several public figures, including a former minister, Bernardo de Irigoyen, journalist San-

¹⁵ Ricardo Salas Edwards, *Balmaceda y el Parlamentarismo en Chile: un estudio de psicología política chilena* (Santiago de Chile, 1916), 106-107.

¹⁶ *The Standard and River Plate News*, March 30, April 1, 1879, henceforth referred to as *The Standard*; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 503, 507.

¹⁷ José E. Uriburu, *Guerra del Pacífico: Episodios, 1879 á 1881* (Buenos Aires, 1899), 42; Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, I, 329-335.

¹⁸ *The Standard*, March 28, April 29, 1879.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1879; *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), March 28, 1879; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 503.

²⁰ *The Standard*, April 1, 1879. The serious nature of this political disequilibrium, in which the historic forces of provincial sectionalism and national authority opposed each other, was made manifest in the Argentine Revolution of 1880, resulting in the final federalization of the municipality of Buenos Aires.

tiago Estrada, Senator Félix Frías, and Doctor Miguel Goyena.²¹ Although the Avellaneda government tried to maintain domestic harmony, the people of Buenos Aires grew increasingly hostile to any accommodation with Chile.

There were still other reasons for Chilean concern. Before Balmaceda arrived, the Argentine government had sent Minister of War Julio A. Roca with five thousand men into the southern territories, ostensibly to chastise the Indians who had been threatening the areas bordering Buenos Aires province. Naturally Balmaceda suspected that Roca also intended to extend dominion over the disputed Patagonian territory. At the same time Bolivian agents canvassed the Argentine provinces of Salta, Jujuy, Tucumán, and Mendoza in search of mules and muleteers for use in its war against Chile.²²

On April 5 Chile's declaration of war against Bolivia and Peru finally became official. Shortly before two p.m. Balmaceda was sitting in his hotel room awaiting the evening, when he was to present his credentials to the Argentine Foreign Minister. Suddenly he heard the din of shouts and sirens; news of the Chilean declaration of war had been received from Santiago.²³ The Argentine government immediately notified him that it disapproved of the hostile rioting, but at the same time it postponed official reception of his mission.²⁴ Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Manuel A. Montes de Oca received him privately that evening.

As Balmaceda later recalled his feelings at that first meeting, he realized that Argentina wanted to take advantage of Chile's afflictions. With "death in his soul," he prepared "to sign any treaty."²⁵ To his surprise Montes de Oca declared unofficially that Argentina "would not take advantage of the difficulties of Chile," but would adhere to the strictest neutrality.²⁶ For three days Balmaceda awaited an official proclamation of Argentine neutrality, while Argentina tested him severely by sending a naval squadron to the Río Negro to threaten the Strait of Magellan. On April 8 Balmaceda again asked Argentina to make her neutrality official, and once more,

²¹ Burr, *By Reason or Force*, 144; Burr, *Stillborn Panama Congress*, 35; Salas Edwards, *Balmaceda*, 107; Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 442; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 505. For an account of the activities of Estrada during the period, see Nestor T. Auza, *Santiago Estrada y el conflicto de límites con Chile* (Buenos Aires, 1966).

²² Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 443; Délano, *Balmaceda*, 50.

²³ Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 503.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 503, 508; Yrarrázaval Larraín, *El Presidente Balmaceda*, I, 208.

²⁵ Vicente G. Quesada, *Mis memorias diplomáticas* (Buenos Aires, 1907), 23; Ruiz-Moreno, *Relaciones exteriores argentinas*, 277.

²⁶ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 443.

Montes de Oca replied informally that Argentina would not exploit Chilean difficulties.²⁷

In their first official conference a week later, Montes de Oca officially proclaimed Argentine neutrality and hinted that the Argentine Senate would ratify the Fierro-Sarratea convention. But following subsequent conversations with two Argentine elder statesmen, Bartolomé Mitre and Domingo F. Sarmiento, Montes de Oca suggested that the boundary question be settled separately. Although Balmaceda declared that he would sign any agreement settling the issue, he nevertheless desired that the Argentine Senate ratify the Fierro-Sarratea Convention.²⁸

The Argentine change of attitude may have been partly due to the results of concurrent negotiations with Peru. That country had earlier instructed her minister in Buenos Aires, Aníbal Víctor de la Torre, to offer Argentina the Bolivian territories between twenty-four and twenty-seven degrees latitude on the west coast, in exchange for Argentina's entrance into the conflict against Chile. The project failed, however, for Bolivia rejected Peru's suggestion on the grounds that it would destroy her geopolitical equilibrium. At any rate Montes de Oca believed the plan to be "so vague in the correspondence of Uriburu [Argentine minister to Bolivia] that it could not be given consideration." A further offer by the Peruvian chancellor, Manuel Irigoyen, drew a similar negative response from the Argentine Foreign Minister.²⁹ Still hoping to draw Argentina into the Peru-Bolivian alliance, de la Torre subsequently interviewed Avellaneda and Montes de Oca, but Argentina's lack of a strong navy defeated his plan. Despite his failure, de la Torre's presence in Buenos Aires placed Balmaceda in a difficult position.³⁰

The more vocal elements in Buenos Aires, led by Félix Frías and Bernardo Irigoyen, continued to condemn the Fierro-Sarratea convention. At the same time, Montes de Oca still supported a different solution. Mitre and Sarmiento recommended reserve on Argentina's part and favored extending the status quo of the recent convention for ten years. By the end of that time both men felt that Argentina would far outweigh Chile.³¹ The official reason which Montes de Oca

²⁷ Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 508; Civati Bernasconi, *Guerra del Pacífico*, 105-106.

²⁸ Balmaceda to Santa María: Sesión de 21 de Abril de 1879, quoted in Antonio Varas, *Correspondencia de Don Antonio Varas sobre la Guerra del Pacífico* (Santiago, 1918), 258.

²⁹ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 447; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 504-505.

³⁰ De la Torre to Yrigoyen, May 24, 1879, quoted in Pedro Yrigoyen, *La Alianza*, 347-348; Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 442, 448.

³¹ *The Standard*, April 7, 1879; Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 444.

presented to Balmaceda, however, was that Chile had excluded Patagonia from the negotiations, and that this question must be cleared up before the Argentine Congress could act.³² Balmaceda falsely replied that as long as the Fierro-Sarratea agreement remained unratified, he had no authority to propose or to agree to any settlement.³³ The question thus reached an impasse; meanwhile Bolivia and Peru continued to seek Argentine aid.

After Argentina declared her neutrality, the Chilean government adopted a stiffer attitude on the limits question. Replying to Balmaceda's wires in mid-April, Pinto and Santa María instructed their envoy to insist upon the Fierro-Sarratea treaty as the basis for any solution.³⁴ At the same time they set out to mend other fences. Historian José V. Lastarria sought the sympathy of Brazil for "the purpose of neutralizing or destroying the action of the Argentine Republic."³⁵ Alberto Blest Gana attempted to forestall European intervention, and Joaquín Godoy was sent to Ecuador for the same purpose.³⁶

On April 23 the Argentine government formally adopted the position that the Patagonian question ought to be suspended for ten or twelve years. Minister de la Torre of Peru, always informed about the proceedings, reported that Avellaneda, Vice President Eduardo Costa, and legislators Mitre, Sarmiento, and Guillermo Rawson were present at the meeting and that Sarmiento had been entrusted with defending the policy of suspension before the Senate.

Balmaceda had arrived in Buenos Aires early enough to gauge the policy of the government and the feelings of the people. He had tried to make clear to the Argentine cabinet the advantages of neutrality and the dangers of becoming involved in the war as an ally of Peru and Bolivia.³⁷ The Buenos Aires *Standard*, meanwhile, suggested that Brazil's guarded reticence had influenced Argentina's policy. As Balmaceda realized, Brazil, conscious of her growing power in southern South America, would almost certainly have to defend the integrity of Chile against an Argentine-Peruvian alliance. Thus, indeed, Brazil held the South American balance of power.³⁸ More-

³² Ruiz-Moreno, *Relaciones exteriores argentinas*, 277.

³³ Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 80.

³⁴ Sesión de 21 de Abril, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 259.

³⁵ Santa María to Lastarria, May 2, 1879, quoted in Burr, *By Reason or Force*, 145.

³⁶ Pike, *Chile and the United States*, 47; Burr, *Stillborn Panama Congress*, 33-35; Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 434-446, 453ff.

³⁷ *The Standard*, April 27, May 1, 1879.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, April 27, 1879; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 511.

over, the Peruvian navy, highly touted in Argentina, had lost much of its glamor in failing to sweep the sea clear of Chilean warships. As *La Nación* commented on April 27, there was "not a vessel belonging to it fit for the sea."³⁹

Balmaceda, therefore, assumed an attitude of some bravado at this juncture and warned that the War of the Pacific would never alter the course of Chilean foreign policy.⁴⁰ As he continued his policy of watchful waiting, Argentina received further evidence concerning the relative strength of the belligerents.⁴¹ Although provincial elections caused much excitement, Argentine statesmen began to see potential shortcomings in an alliance with either Peru or Bolivia.⁴² On May 2 the Chilean cabinet, again changing its signals, authorized Balmaceda to initiate negotiations by offering an arrangement accepting Argentine ownership of Patagonia, but assuring Chile's continued possession of Punta Arenas.⁴³ President Pinto also suggested that Balmaceda seek further compensation from Argentina for this proposed settlement.

Three days later, before a great crowd of civil and military officials, President Avellaneda addressed the new session of the Argentine Chamber of Deputies. He observed that the current negotiations would soon be completed and the results submitted to Congress for approval.⁴⁴ *The Standard* hoped that Avellaneda's sentiments would be approved in both houses, and that "the unruly elements at work would prove insufficient to defeat the wisdom of our President and the sound common sense of our legislature."⁴⁵ During the following weeks, however, the "unruly elements" had their say. Argentine politicians fumed over the fact that Chilean cattle interests had begun operations at San Gregorio, which, because of its fine bay, seemed destined to dominate Patagonia.⁴⁶ The area was also rich in guano deposits, while at the same time, valuable coral beds had been discovered in the disputed Río Gallegos.⁴⁷ These issues injected new bitterness into the question of limits.

In the interim, Balmaceda and Montes de Oca met on May 12. The Chilean envoy continued to stress a solution through arbitration,

³⁹ *La Nación*, April 27, 1879; *The Standard*, April 30, 1879.

⁴⁰ Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 80; Déllano, *Balmaceda*, 53.

⁴¹ Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 81.

⁴² *The Standard*, May 1, 1879.

⁴³ Sesión de 2 de Mayo, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 279.

⁴⁴ *The Standard*, May 7, 1879.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1879.

⁴⁶ *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), May 12, 1879.

⁴⁷ *The Standard*, May 17, 1879.

while his adversary supported the postponement of the question for ten years. This diplomatic impasse led the Chilean government to seek a convincing military victory against the Peru-Bolivian alliance, in the hope that such a conquest would deter possible Argentine action.⁴⁸ At the same time President Pinto's growing unpopularity in the face of Chilean jingoism forced Balmaceda to seek a settlement that would not concede anything to Argentina.⁴⁹

In Buenos Aires the enemies of Chilean accommodation initiated a series of violent public gatherings. This agitation reached into the Cámara, which held secret sessions on May 13 and 14, culminating in the decision that Argentina should arm herself immediately.⁵⁰ Apparently Avellaneda and Montes de Oca had lost control of the situation. Meanwhile, Balmaceda's position grew more desperate. In a telegram to Santiago he reported Argentina's acquisition of armaments, and hoped that Chile could obtain a decisive military verdict, "con desesperación."⁵¹ That victory occurred, finally, on May 21, when Chilean naval forces destroyed Peru's ironclad, the *Independencia*, in the Battle of Iquique. With the sinking of the *Independencia*, fifty percent of Peru's naval effectiveness was lost.⁵² Once again, Argentine neutrality became a realistic policy.

Although the Battle of Iquique predisposed Argentine statesmen to reassess their country's strategic relationship with Chile, it did not insure a solution to the limits question. In fact, by this time the negotiations had fallen through.⁵³ When the Fierro-Sarratea pact was submitted to the Argentine Congress on May 23, *The Standard* predicted that "this veritable Gordian Knot was about to take another noticeable twist—it would probably be cut."⁵⁴ A day later, however, the same paper reported that Montes de Oca and Balmaceda had breakfasted together two days before, perhaps indicating that the question was settled. *The Standard's* indecision reflected a general lack of certainty as to the outcome of the negotiations. The Buenos Aires *Porteño* indicated on May 26 that the Chilean question was definitely settled, with Patagonia going to Argentina; but at the same time, Peruvian envoy de la Torre believed that Argentina would

⁴⁸ Burr, *Stillborn Panama Congress*, 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Balmaceda to Santa María, May 22, 1879, quoted in Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 445; *The Standard*, May 15, 17, 1879.

⁵¹ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 446.

⁵² *La Nación*, May 25, 1879; *The Standard*, May 27, 1879; Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 507; Yrarrázaval Larraín, *El Presidente Balmaceda*, I, 209.

⁵³ Balmaceda to Santa María, May 24, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 308.

⁵⁴ *The Standard*, May 23, 1879.

reject any treaty not ceding all territories north of Punta Arenas to Argentina.⁵⁵

On May 28, after nearly two months of negotiating in Buenos Aires, Balmaceda agreed to present the settlement proposed by the Argentines to his own government as soon as he returned to Santiago.⁵⁶ On the same day he reported to Foreign Minister Santa María that he would abstain from further negotiations, since Santa María had decided to work through Sarratea in Santiago.⁵⁷ On May 30 President Pinto and Sarratea agreed on a direct disposition of the problem. The Strait of Magellan and Tierra del Fuego would go to Chile, while Argentina would obtain dominion over the Atlantic Coastal areas and adjacent islands. Arbitration would fix Chile's eastern limits in Patagonia.⁵⁸ On June 1 Balmaceda reported that apparently Buenos Aires had accepted the idea of prolonging for ten years the status quo established in the Fierro-Sarratea Convention and asked for Chilean approval.⁵⁹ The agreement of May 28, which would give all of Patagonia to Argentina, was ratified in Santiago and returned to Buenos Aires for approval. On June 3 Balmaceda and Montes de Oca signed another brief convention, postponing for ten years the ratification of the Fierro-Sarratea pact.⁶⁰

As the situation stood in early June, the Argentine Congress would be asked to ratify both the Fierro-Sarratea agreement, providing for arbitration, and the Convention of June 3, which suspended the question for ten years while providing free navigation of the Strait to both countries.⁶¹ President Pinto, in a letter to the Buenos Aires *Tribuna*, hoped that the Argentine Congress "would approve the Treaty so no fresh misunderstandings [could] arise."⁶² Fresh misunderstandings arose, however, with the subsequent announcement that Argentina's Minister of War, Julio Roca, had created two maritime subdivisions on the southern coast, one in Puerto Deseado, the other in Río Gallegos.⁶³ Balmaceda remained silent at

⁵⁵ Bulnes, *Guerra del Pacífico*, II, 445; *El Porteño* (Buenos Aires), May 26, 1879.

⁵⁶ Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 81.

⁵⁷ Sesión de 26 de Mayo, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 309-310; Sesión de 28 de Mayo, 1879, *ibid.*, 311.

⁵⁸ Sesión de 30 de Mayo, 1879, *ibid.*, 318.

⁵⁹ Sesión de 1 de Junio, 1879, *ibid.*, 318.

⁶⁰ Yrarrázaval Larraín, *El Presidente Balmaceda*, I, 209; Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 81.

⁶¹ Sesión de 5 de Junio, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 320-321.

⁶² *La Tribuna* (Buenos Aires), June 3, 1879.

⁶³ Ruiz-Moreno, *Relaciones exteriores argentinas*, 278.

first but later protested that Chile could not be expected to accede to these acts.⁶⁴

A week later the two agreements were submitted to the Argentine legislature. As always, public opinion was divided over the question, *The Standard* claiming that the status quo should be preserved for a longer period, the Buenos Aires *Courier* bewailing the fact that its government had not taken better advantage of Chile's military pre-occupation.⁶⁵ On the other side, those persons who had more interest in local affairs, commerce, and the forthcoming presidential election of 1880 were friendlier to the agreements and desired their approval.⁶⁶

Apparently expecting that the conventions would be ratified, Balmaceda notified his government on June 14 that he would like to return to Chile. A week later, the Argentine Senate met secretly to discuss the Chilean treaties. No one was certain which way the vote would turn, *El Nacional* predicting that the division would be very close.⁶⁷ Balmaceda waited an entire week while the treaties were discussed. After many late-night sessions⁶⁸ it was finally announced on June 27 at 6:00 p.m. that the Senate had voted down both the Fierro-Sarratea accord and the Convention of June 3.⁶⁹ Chilean relations with the Argentine appeared headed for further difficulties.

In the last analysis the issue centered on the personalities of Argentine politicians. *The Standard* pointed out on June 12 that great questions which come before Congress always "lose or gain by the mere popularity of the individuals with whom they are identified."⁷⁰ The issue was neither Patagonia nor the Strait of Magellan, but Senators Frías and Estrada versus Montes de Oca.⁷¹ In fact, the battle for ratification caused Montes de Oca to submit his resignation, and although Avellaneda persuaded him to change his mind, his prestige had suffered a grievous blow. Meanwhile on July 2 the Chilean government set the tone for the remainder of Balmaceda's stay in Buenos Aires by notifying him that any subsequent Argentine proposition was to be transmitted directly to Santiago. Although

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *The Courier* (Buenos Aires), quoted in *The Standard*, June 6, 11, 1879.

⁶⁶ Thomas O. Osborn to William Evarts, June 12, 1879, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States . . . 1879* (Washington, 1880), 23 (hereafter *Foreign Relations, 1879*).

⁶⁷ *El Nacional* (Buenos Aires), June 21, 1879.

⁶⁸ *The Standard*, June 26, 1879.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1879; Sesión de 30 de Junio, 1879, Varas, *Correspondencia*, 330-331.

⁷⁰ *The Standard*, June 12, 1879.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Balmaceda would remain in Buenos Aires for another month, his duties had ended.⁷²

It might appear that Balmaceda had failed in his mission to Buenos Aires, but such was not the case. He did not grant a single concession on the disputed boundary. Moreover, Argentina declared her neutrality and did not join Bolivia and Peru in the War of the Pacific. Balmaceda, therefore, can be credited with safeguarding his country's position for a more favorable time. Far from being intimidated, he listened patiently to Montes de Oca's proposals, thus giving the Chilean navy time to win the Battle of Iquique on May 21. This victory strengthened Chile's military position and morale, thus weighing heavily upon Argentina's decision not to intervene.⁷³

Several extraneous factors played a large role in Balmaceda's success. One such factor was the respect shown by Argentine statesmen to the South American balance of power. The attitude of Brazil toward possible Argentine intervention clearly influenced the Argentine decision to remain neutral. If Argentina joined the Peru-Bolivian alliance, Brazil might attempt to uphold Chile's territorial integrity. In fact, Chile's envoy to Brazil, Lastarria stated adamantly that Peruvian propaganda "would not change the concept held in Rio of the justice of Chile in the question of the Pacific, nor much less the political interests of the [Brazilian] Empire in helping us in our questions with Argentina."⁷⁴

Another fortuitous circumstance favoring Balmaceda was Avellaneda's personal preference for neutrality. Many observers believed that he would resign before declaring war on Chile.⁷⁵ Other important statesmen, such as Mitre and Sarmiento, continually argued that the war would so drain Chilean strength that Argentina could easily secure a favorable settlement. A third important factor influencing Argentine neutrality was her apprehension of Chilean maritime superiority. One writer has considered Chilean sea power to be the most salient consideration preventing Argentina from taking sides with Peru and Bolivia. It can be argued that Argentina might

⁷² The question of limits was finally settled in 1881 through an arbitral award rendered by the United States. See Ireland, *Boundaries, Possessions, and Conflicts*, 22-23. See also Ricardo Levene, *A History of Argentina* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 497; Ruiz-Moreno, *Relaciones exteriores Argentinas*, 229-235; and Francisco García Calderón, *Mediación de los Estados de Norte América en la Guerra del Pacífico* (Buenos Aires, 1884).

⁷³ Bromsen, "Rise of Balmaceda," 82-83.

⁷⁴ José V. Lastarria to Miguel L. Amunátegui, Montevideo, September 1, 1879, quoted in Burr, *Stillborn Panama Congress*, 37.

⁷⁵ Thomas O. Osborn to William Evarts, July 31, 1879, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations, 1879*, 25.

have gone to war had she possessed the iron-clad ships necessary to guarantee naval success.⁷⁶ More recent scholarship indicates another factor directing Argentina's diplomatic course. During the decade preceding the war, she had made remarkable economic progress in several areas, most notably in developing the Pampas as a grain- and meat-producing center. Self-satisfied and economically stable, Argentina would have risked a profitable European trade by declaring war.⁷⁷

Thus, although Balmaceda did manage to forestall the loss of the disputed territory to Argentina and secure Argentine neutrality, he cannot claim full credit for his success. Nonetheless, his mission, if not clearly crucial in a tactical sense, added greatly to his personal prestige. Upon his return to Santiago in August, he found himself a hero as he again took his seat in the Chamber of Deputies, shortly to become Minister of Foreign Relations and Minister of the Interior under a new president, Domingo Santa María. In 1886 Balmaceda himself became one of the most controversial presidents in Chilean history. Five years later, with his forces defeated in a bloody civil war, he committed suicide—ironically, at the Argentine legation in Santiago.

⁷⁶ Encina, *Historia*, XVI, 511.

⁷⁷ See, for example, the fruitful hypothesis of James R. Scobie, *Revolution on the Pampas: A Social History of Argentine Wheat, 1860-1910* (Austin, 1964). See also, V. G. Kiernan, "Foreign Interests in the War of the Pacific," *HAHR*, XXXV (February 1955), 14-36.