The Shining Path in the Corner of the Dead

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Introduction

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When the citizens of Lima awoke on December 26, 1980, to find dead dogs, adorned with signs reading "Deng Xiao-Ping, son of a bitch" hanging from the lamp posts of their ancient city, they could not possibly have known that they were standing on the edge of an abyss which would plunge their country into the most savage, prolonged, and bitter struggle it has ever known. An obscure and dogmatic political faction, "The Communist Party of Peru by the Shining Path of José Carlos Mariátegui," headed by a bespectacled and bookish philosophy professor named Abimael Guzmán from a provincial university, seemed a joke, a footnote in a wonderful new page in Peruvian history, the restoration of democracy after twelve years of military rule.

Yet Peru was facing a challenge unique in Latin America. Sendero Luminoso is a movement sui generis. Not a 1960's-style foco guerrilla movement, and tied neither to external aid, nor to sponsoring nations like Cuba or the Soviet Union, Sendero is a mass movement combining Maoist revolutionary ideology with Andean messianic tradition, a marriage of Marxism-Leninism with the nativist communism of an early 20th-century Peruvian intellectual, José Carlos Mariátegui. The Communist Party of Peru--Shining Path (PCP-SL) has declared itself and its leader the "fourth sword of Marxism" (after Marx, Lenin, and Mao). There never was a trace of romanticism about Shining Path; Abimael Guzmán and his comrades spent a decade preparing for "people's war" in Ayacucho, one of the most remote, Indian, peasant, and poverty-stricken regions of Peru. Ayacucho (which means "Corner of the dead" in Quechua) was fertile ground for revolution; its university, the Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga (UNSCH), where Guzmán was an instructor, provided an eager population of young aspiring mestizos and Indians ready for indoctrination and recruiting. It is significant that the greatest political turmoil in the department of Ayacucho in the 1960's came not over the demand for free land, but for free education. The importance of the link between the university and Sendero cannot be overstated; it was at the UNSCH that Guzmán and his followers created their "Andean Yenan," making the ideological evolution from "Marxism-Leninism-Maoism" to pensamiento Gonzalo ("Gonzalo thought," named for Abimael Guzmán's nom de guerre, "Gonzalo.") Guzmán and his followers learned Quechua, and spent years working in small native villages, often inter-marrying into these communities; thus they built a broad base of support before launching their revolution. In the spring of 1980 Guzmán convened the first "military school" to prepare his cadres for ILA--inicio de la lucha armada, or the beginning of armed struggle.

ILA began on May 17, when a small band of young senderistas entered the polling station in Chuschi, seized the ballot boxes, and burned them in the town square. For the next two years, Sendero was almost unopposed in Ayacucho; the guerrillas assassinated policemen and elected officials, seized weapons, ammunition, and dynamite, entered peasant villages to indoctrinate people and recruit for their cause, held "people's trials" and meted out punishment, which was sometimes execution, for the "rich," or "enemies of the people." Early press reports stressed the guerrillas' ferocity and primativeness; the press made fun of the guerrillas' use of traditional Indian slings to hurl dynamite at targets--forgetting that
such weaponry was easy to obtain and use. Lima essentially ignored the phenomenon in the distant department. It was only when the senderistas began to destroy electricity pylons, inflicting blackouts on the capital, bomb foreign-owned factories, and ignite fires in the shape of a hammer and sickle on the hillsides above Lima, that the government took the movement seriously. At the end of December, 1982, President Fernando Belaúnde Terry, who had been ousted from power by the military in 1968, conceded that his police were incapable of containing the violence, and signed a decree placing Ayacucho under a state of emergency, sending in the armed forces to deal with Sendero. This was the start of bloodshed and tragedy which would shape the course of the war for years to come.

The Peruvian armed forces were not equal to the task. Their primary mission was to plan for a conventional war with either Chile or Ecuador, and to hold the eastern jungle areas against foreign incursions. They were ill-equipped and poorly-trained for counterinsurgency war; their only modern experience with guerrillas had been a brief campaign in 1965 against a Cuban-style farquista movement of middle-class intellectuals, which had been quickly and easily stamped out. Its very success made the army overconfident. The most recent examples of counter-guerrilla warfare--those of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile--were not auspicious ones. All three militaries had resorted to the most violent repression, waging guerra sucia, "dirty war" against their own populations, in order to eradicate urban and rural guerrilla movements. The Peruvian military and security forces, under the command of General Roberto Noel, began a campaign of mass terror against the peasants of the Andes. Particularly brutal were the sinchis, special counter-guerrilla units of the Guardia Civil (Civil Guard). The sinchis had been trained by U.S. Special Forces in the 1960's; the word "sinchi" is Quechua for "powerful." Their counterinsurgency tactics consisted of terrorizing peasants into cooperating with the government. Rape, torture, indiscriminate murder, and "disappearances," became common in the emergency areas. If the Sendero guerrilla, in the Maoist fashion, was to be the fish which swam in the sea of the people, the solution Noel and his security forces advocated was to drain the pond.

The military, borrowing a tactic from the British and American counterinsurgency experiences in Malaysia and Vietnam, ordered the formation of peasant self-defense patrols, rondas campesinas, and the transfer of many villages from their traditional locations to new sites, making them the equivalent of "strategic hamlets." Rondas had existed in northern Peru for more than a decade, formed by villagers to stop cattle rustling, but the southern rondas were anything but voluntary. To refuse to join a ronda was to imply sympathy with or support for the guerrillas, and so villages were forced to form patrols, which were given nothing with which to defend themselves, or at best, a few old rifles or shotguns. Soon another facet of the revolution became apparent: at times villages used their rondas not against Sendero, but to fight against other communities in order to settle old scores or rivalries which had existed for years. Thus a true civil war began to rage in the mountains.

Within the year reports of indiscriminate and widespread human rights abuses began to surface from the emergency zones. Still white, cosmopolitan Lima paid little attention to what was happening in the "other Peru"--the Peru of poor, Indian peasants. Then in January 1983, an incident took place which shocked the nation, and threw into stark relief the kind of struggle which was taking place in the mountains. Seven journalists from Lima newspapers and magazines, accompanied by a native driver, traveled high into the Andes to investigate a report that villagers from the tiny hamlet of Uchuraccay had killed a band of senderistas. The band of reporters climbed to Uchuraccay and disappeared. Their bodies were unearthed days later, stripped of clothing, buried face down, with their ankles broken. All had been bludgeoned to death. The national outcry was so great that the government was forced to convene a committee to investigate the killings, headed by the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa.
The commission's findings were highly controversial, and remained the subject of harsh criticism for years. Vargas Llosa and his fellow investigators, after interviewing villagers, police, anthropologists, sociologists, and other experts, blamed the killings on a series of misunderstandings: the Iquichanos of Uchuraccay, who had killed several guerrillas a few nights before, feared reprisals, and, with what they felt was the tacit encouragement of the sinchis to kill any strangers who appeared, murdered the journalists in the mistaken belief they were guerrillas seeking revenge. That evidence contradicting this conclusion quickly surfaced only added to the appearance of a cover-up. In a wider sense, however, the commission placed the blame on a cultural gulf between the two Perus—the European, Western Peru of Lima and the coast, and the Indian, peasant, traditional Peru of the highlands. No one was ever punished for the murders. A few months later senderistas massacred 66 people, including old women and children, in the small village of Lucanamarca; Peru had learned that a violent and savage war was raging in the most remote provinces of the country.

By 1984 it was apparent that the security force's campaign of guerra sucia had had some success against Shining Path. Guerrillas were forced out of their original zones of operation into other provinces and departments. This had the effect of both diluting and expanding the war. While many peasants resented Sendero's pulling out and leaving them exposed to the wrath of the army and sinchis, the moves had the effect of spreading the revolution to new areas. Sendero also began to contemplate a fundamental shift in strategy. In Maoist doctrine, people's war is fundamentally a rural war, whose objective is to surround the cities, which will fall as a result of victory. But by 1984 Sendero was shifting to a new urban strategy, in which the cities would also be the target of revolution. In part this was due to pressure on Sendero in the countryside, but critics also maintained that Guzmán may have become impatient with the slow progress in the campo and decided to speed up final victory. A meeting of the PCP declared Lima and other cities to be part of next year's objective in the strategy elaborated by Presidente Gonzalo. The construction of support bases(bases de apoyo), which signified the establishment of "liberated communities," was a crucial part of people's war. Popular schools had already been established inside Lima to recruit new party militants, as well as clandestine cells in factories, universities, barrios, and pueblos jóvenes, the shanty-towns springing up around Lima and other cities. The Maoist blueprint for the overthrow of the bourgeois, reactionary state, included plans that were designated DDC—desarrollar, defender y construir bases de apoyo—to develop, defend, and construct bases of support for people's war.

Another reason for the change in emphasis was that Sendero's welcome in the countryside was weakening. While there was still plenty of misery and poverty on which to draw support, the new society which Sendero was building in its liberated zones was too restrictive for some people. While communities applauded rough justice for thieves, town merchants who had gouged them, and other miscreants, they found Sendero's puritanical morality—prohibiting traditional fiestas, banning drink and narcotics, disbanding neighborhood, church, and fraternal associations—difficult to accept. Sendero also imposed autarky, or economic self-sufficiency, on communities, banning inter-village trade, prohibiting peasants from taking their produce to local markets, and destroying bridges to enforce total isolation. This was done partly to cut food supplies to the cities, and partly to reinforce Sendero's strict rule. Such actions proved highly unpopular, and cost Sendero a great deal of support in the highlands.

By 1985 the Belaúnde regime was weary and prepared to leave office. The economic picture was gloomy, and the government could neither crush the revolution nor formulate a coherent strategy against it. To add to its difficulties, a new guerrilla group emerged from the Peruvian left to launch its struggle for liberation. This was MRTA, the Movimiento
Revolucionario Túpac Amaru. MRTA was an "old fashioned" Cuban-style guerrilla group, as nationalistic as Sendero was internationalist. Although Belaúnde had fulminated against unspecified "foreign elements" he claimed were supporting and bankrolling Sendero, it was quite clear from its virulent rhetoric that Shining Path was an entirely indigenous phenomenon, rejecting and vilifying every other Marxist country and movement in the world. But there was another source, a deadly and ominous one, from which Sendero Luminoso could obtain funds. By mid-decade it was clear that Sendero had made major inroads in an economically crucial area of the country: the jungle regions where coca was grown.

The Upper Huallaga Valley had been colonized enthusiastically by the Belaúnde government in the 1960's, and then left to stagnate without resources or support. Peasants raised coca in the fertile valley, and soon a flourishing traffic in basic coca paste had arisen. The coca paste was flown to Columbia for processing into cocaine, and millions of coca dollars flowed back to the region. Anti-narcotics operations by the police, focusing on eradication were insufficient to stem the flood, even with help from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Crop substitution schemes were so poorly funded that they had no chance of success. The police, in attacking the peasants' livelihood, managed to antagonize practically the entire population. Sendero intervened to defend the peasants, and to act as intermediaries between coca cultivators and the Columbian narcotraficantes. While said not to be engaging in the trade itself, they taxed coca flights out of the area; this lucrative trade was soon netting them tens of millions of dollars a year--more money, one observer pointed out, than any legitimate political movement in Peru had at its disposal. The money was used to buy weapons, bankroll the movement, and increasingly, to support the families of imprisoned senderistas.

In 1985 Alán García, the young, vigorous, leftist leader of APRA was elected president on a near-universal wave of hope and enthusiasm. García promised a new approach to the war, addressing its root causes: poverty and underdevelopment. He also promised to punish soldiers and policemen who abused human rights. His resolution was quickly put to the test. By 1986 several hundred captured senderistas, men and women, were warehoused in three Lima prisons. They quickly converted their wings into "revolutionary territory," clean and orderly, the walls painted with slogans and festooned with banners. The ferociously disciplined prisoners held education classes in Marxist theory, taught the illiterate among them to read, marched in formation and chanted slogans. In June, 1986, the prisoners staged a simultaneous uprising, coinciding with a meeting of the Socialist International in Lima, in a deliberate effort to embarrass García. He quickly capitulated to pressure from the military, and turned over responsibility for suppressing the rebellion to the army and marines. Using helicopters, rockets, and machine guns, the military crushed the revolts, practically destroying the senderista block in one jail. Almost 300 prisoners died; at least one hundred were executed, shot in the head at point-blank range as they lay on the ground after surrendering. This was the armed forces' solution to terrorism. Although García swore to punish those responsible, no officer was ever brought to justice. Sendero seemed to exult in the terrible price it had paid, drawing strength from the martyrdom and celebrating the revolt as el día de la heroicidad-- the day of heroism. The three prisons, it triumphantly declared, had been transformed into luminosas trincheras de combate-- shining trenches of combat.

Afterward the will to fight Sendero seemed to drain out of García. Thanks to his highly nationalistic and confrontational approach to international monetary agencies like the IMF and World Bank, foreign credit to Peru evaporated, and the economy went into severe decline, registering the world's highest rate of hyperinflation. Thousands of Peruvians emigrated, tens of thousands more fled the fighting in the highlands and packed into huge shantytowns (pueblos jóvenes) surrounding Lima and other cities, where they constituted a
volatile and inflammatory population, and the target of Sendero's urban infiltration campaign. But their presence was also the spur to a growing movement for mutual aid and support, a phenomenon which grew as the Peruvian state became more feeble, corrupt, and unable to help its own citizens.

Shining Path had not been universally successful in the highlands; it was noticeable that wherever there already existed strong popular groups--peasant federations, unions, neighborhood associations, church groups--Sendero made little headway in recruiting people to its cause. In Puno, where a strong peasant federation had been organized years before by another Marxist party (PUM), Sendero failed to gain a foothold. The deepening economic and social crisis in Peru under the APRA government caused similar urban bodies to spring up--soup kitchens, neighborhood cooperatives, the vaso de leche (glass of milk) program which distributed milk to children. These "popular organizations" were a bulwark against Sendero's urban strategy, and consequently, its principal target.

By 1988-90, the situation had reached "strategic equilibrium," Sendero could not take power; the military could not destroy the movement. But time was on Abimael Guzmán's side: the worse the situation grew in the country, the more profound the state of crisis, the greater the breakdown of public services, the stronger Shining Path grew. In 1988 a horrible new phenomenon appeared: a right-wing "death squad," the Comando Rodrigo Franco, named for a murdered APRA official, began to kill suspected leftists. Suspected of ties to APRA and the Interior Ministry, the mysterious body operated for approximately a year and a half before quietly disappearing; Peru was thus spared part of the agony which its Southern Cone neighbors had experienced. In 1988 Abimael Guzmán broke his silence, and that of the Party. Sendero had always been highly secretive; in contrast to most guerrilla movements, it shunned publicity, never explaining its attacks or releasing communiqués to the press. By the late '80s the newspaper El Diario, under its editor, Luis Arce Borja, had virtually become Sendero's mouthpiece. Now it published what it called "the interview of the century": President Gonzalo rompe el silencio! (President Gonzalo breaks his silence!), it announced jubilantly. The interview, some 40 pages of turgid Marxist rhetoric, nevertheless gave valuable insight into the personality of Guzmán, and a rare glimpse into his plans for the future of Peru.

1989 was a watershed year. No time could be more propitious for Sendero to gain the support of, or at least sympathy of, the masses. They virtually controlled the Upper Huallaga Valley, collecting millions in taxes on the cocaine traffic; an assault on the police station at Uchiza, which wiped it out, had the tacit support of the town's entire population. "Armed strikes," which people broke at the risk of their lives, demonstrated Sendero's growing strength in the cities. And yet Sendero did not sweep to victory in 1989; on the contrary, it suffered major blows, in Lima and in other parts of the country. El Diario was finally suppressed, its editor escaping to Europe to publish a pro-Sendero newspaper there. The movement's isolation increased after the cold-blooded murder of two French agricultural experts. Finally, its call for a boycott of municipal elections was only partially successful. In many emergency zones people were afraid to go to the polls or turned in spoiled or blank ballots. But in general the turn-out throughout the nation demonstrated that the majority of citizens still preferred peaceful solutions to their problems, and rejected violence as an answer to the country's multiple crises.

By 1990 García sat isolated in the presidential palace, his dreams for Peru shattered. People held their breath, waiting for a military coup, but the armed forces were not eager to repeat the experiences of el doceno, the twelve years of military rule from 1968 to 1980. APRA was discredited, the economy was in ruins, and violence was epidemic throughout the entire country. The 1990 presidential election pitted the leftist mayor of Lima, Alfredo Barrantes, the candidate from Izquierda Unida (United Left), against a right-wing author
who espoused free-market solutions to Peru's problems (Mario Vargas Llosa), and a maverick, Alberto Fujimori, the son of Japanese immigrants. Enduring racist attacks on his heritage (he was derisively called el chinito, the little Chinaman), Fujimori represented himself as the candidate of reform. He had no tangible program, but was backed by some sectors of what had become a desperate business community. To the surprise of many, Fujimori won.

Fujimori promised to force the military to respect human rights, but in fact granted them virtual immunity from prosecution. In any case, by 1990 the judiciary in Peru was too intimidated to indict any soldier, or, in fact, any terrorist; many known senderistas walked out of court free men and women for lack of evidence to convict them. Fujimori's rhetoric, like García's, backed development as the way to undermine the revolution, but his public policies indicated otherwise. Immediately after taking office in 1990 he removed subsidies for basic commodities, whose prices soared at first. "Fujishock," as his critics dubbed it, may have eventually brought down inflation and impressed foreign financial experts, but it only compounded the problems of most of the population. To add to Peru's misery, an outbreak of cholera in 1991 seemed to confirm the nation's descent into the Fourth World.

In 1990 the situation in the Upper Huallaga took an interesting series of turns. The DEA, which had operated semi-clandestinely for some years, became more visible as U.S. President George Bush declared an international war on drugs. Congress appropriated millions of dollars in anti-narcotics aid for Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia. The DEA and Peruvian police built a drug interdiction base at Santa Lucia in the Huallaga, complete with Vietnam-era Huey helicopters, barbed wire, and watch towers. The base was manned by DEA agents, ex-Special Forces veterans, and Peruvian police. (Sendero could not resist launching a Viet Cong-style attack against the base, which was repulsed.) Relations between the DEA and the Peruvian army were abysmal; the U.S. accused the army of taking drug money from the traffickers. Peruvian General Arciniega had in fact decided that his fight was against Shining Path, not poor campesinos who raised coca because they couldn't make a living growing any other crop. MRTA, whose activities and base of support lagged far behind Sendero's, did manage to gain support in certain areas of the Huallaga. Contrary to the accusations of some rightist commentators, MRTA and Sendero had never been allies; in Lima and the Huallaga, they actually fought one another.

The situation from 1990 to 1992 seemed to be one of stalemate. Fujimori showed his authoritarian colors when he announced an autogolpe, or "self-coup" on April 5, 1992. Denouncing Congress and the judiciary as hopelessly corrupt and inefficient (accusations which contained a large measure of truth), he suspended both and ruled by presidential decree. The government quickly established special courts with emergency powers to try terrorists. The military was divided, but Fujimori had the support of enough generals to ratify his assumption of dictatorial power. The U.S. and the international community condemned the autogolpe, but relations with the U.S. were strained over differences in the anti-drug war, and the American military never had the same relationship with or influence over the Peruvian military as it had with the Salvadorans or Guatemalans. Sendero responded to Fujimori with a new tactic: in July it detonated a series of extremely powerful car-bombs in the Lima neighborhoods of Miraflores and San Isidro, among others, causing horrific casualties, extensive damage, and widespread panic. Never, it appeared, had the situation been as dire as it was in the summer of 1992. Shining Path prepared itself for a new, lethal urban offensive, as the capital waited in fear and dread.

Then on September 12, 1992, came the thunderbolt. The police announced the capture of Abimael Guzmán! Not seen in public (except in a captured video) for over a decade, the legendary Presidente Gonzalo, at one time even rumored to be dead, the deity of the revolution, was in the hands of the state. Although rumors abounded in Lima of exotic
CIA spy devices, Guzmán appears to have been captured through old-fashioned police work, and because he grew careless about security. Only the fact that the police general who commanded the operation took the precaution of announcing Guzmán's capture to the press immediately afterward saved his life. When the police raided the upper-class home in which Guzmán was hiding, the portly, bearded intellectual told Dincote's General Antonio Vidal "It's my turn to lose." Pointing a finger at his head, Guzmán said "You can take anything away from a man, except what he has here. And even if he is killed, his followers will remain." By the time the military came to claim Guzmán, it was too late to dispose of him secretly, as they no doubt would have otherwise ruthlessly done. Displayed in a cage before the world, dressed in a ludicrous black-and-white striped convict's outfit, Guzmán shouted his defiance, calling upon his comrades to launch the next phase of people's war.

But Shining Path seemed stunned. Much of the movement's top leadership was captured with Guzmán, and computer disks were seized, with, rumor held, the entire membership of the movement, as well as extensive financial information. In succeeding months, the police were able to capture more cadres and leaders. Abimael Guzmán was tried in camera by a military court. Because the Peruvian constitution provides for capital punishment only in cases of treason during wartime, he was sentenced to life in prison. Most experts were convinced that Guzmán was too dangerous ever to leave custody, and that the government would find some way to kill him. Fujimori urged an amendment to the constitution which would enable him to dispose of Guzmán forever.

Abimael Guzmán spent the next year in solitary confinement, without visitors or even books to read. Sendero Luminoso and its overseas supporters in the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM), a tiny coalition of Maoist parties, had never been overly concerned with human or civil rights before. Now they became fanatically devoted to those of Guzmán, and "International Committee[s] to Preserve the Life of Abimael Guzmán" sprang up in Europe and the U.S. Attacks by Shining Path declined, as the movement's energies were redirected to saving their god-head. The flaws inherent in a cult of personality became apparent after Guzmán's capture. He had personified the revolution; now the movement was decapitated.

A little over a year after Guzmán's capture came a second thunderbolt. In October 1993 Fujimori announced at the United Nations that he had received a letter from Guzmán, asking for negotiations between the government and Sendero! Shining Path, which had rejected and denounced compromise for a decade, now sought it. When party supporters howled that it was a trick, Fujimori showed a video on national television, in which a trim and mustachioed Guzmán, looking fitter than he had since going underground, calmly read the text of his letter to "President Fujimori," a title he would not have even acknowledged "before the fall." He announced the end of the phase of armed struggle, to be replaced by a struggle for an historic peace accord.

But Fujimori, believing Sendero Luminoso now effectively neutralized, had no reason to negotiate with its captured leader. Shining Path now appears to have lost in its bid to topple the Peruvian state. In the two years since Guzman's arrest, some 7,000 members of Sendero have been detained, while thousands more have surrendered to security forces, accepting the amnesty offered in the Law of Repentance. It is reported that Oscar Ramfrez Durand (Compañero Feliciano), one of the few top leaders not captured by the security forces, has reorganized the powerful Lima metropolitan committee under his leadership. In the place of Sendero Luminoso is said to be el Sendero Rojo, or the Red Path, determined to continue people's war, no matter how long it takes to achieve victory. Senderistas cadres often spoke of "carrying their lives on the tips of their fingers," ready at any moment to die for the revolution. The faithful believe that its triumph is inevitable, if it takes fifty or even a
hundred years. On walls in the countryside, the slogan ¡Viva el Presidente Feliciano! has already appeared.

Guzmán has apparently retained the loyalty of the several hundred senderistas incarcerated in Lima prisons, as well as that of the imprisoned party leadership. Together they form what the dissidents perjoratively call el Sendero Negro, the Black Path, the half of the movement which is open to a peace accord with the government. The situation is extremely unclear; bogus press reports, deliberate (and false) leaks from military intelligence, propaganda from Fujimori's supporters, and government pronouncements have created at atmosphere in which nothing is certain. Many asked whether the split between Guzmán and Durand was real or contrived. Was Comrade Feliciano directing a wholly separate movement, or was his task to continue the armed struggle to keep pressure on the government, and give Guzmán a greater bargaining chip? By the end of 1994, it seemed certain that the division between the two factions of Shining Path was genuine.

Meanwhile, sporadic bombings and shootings of policemen have continued. What Peru may now face is a process of "Colombianization," where endemic, low-level guerrilla warfare continues for years, even decades, but the movement has no ability to take power or threaten the nation's existence. Sendero still controls parts of the Upper Huallaga Valley, and therefore has access to unlimited funds. The war may be carried out in the jungle, in parts of the highlands, and in the cities in the foreseeable future. But the decapitation of the movement appears to have effectively ended its once very real threat to establish the Maoist New Democracy in Peru. A summer 1993 poll showed that only 18% of those questioned worried about terrorism; most were concerned about unemployment. Alberto Fujimori, having decided to restore "democracy" and run again, won easily in presidential elections in April, 1995. As the deadline for an amnesty decree for guerrillas approached in early November, 1994, authorities reported that 5,416 Peruvians had sought amnesty under the law.

By Way of Conclusion

The war has resulted in some 27,000 deaths since May, 1980, and caused perhaps $22 billion dollars in damage; "the social cost in terms of suffering, hatred, and disunity is immeasurable."* Having read, skimmed, or otherwise absorbed more than a thousand sources on Shining Path, I feel reasonably justified in formulating a few conclusions about the experience of Sendero Luminoso in Peru. First, it is obvious that the struggle came about because of a conjunction of two factors: the index of misery and frustration in rural Peru was high, and a remarkable movement stood ready to take advantage of that anger. In some ways Peru does conform to the classic theory of the "j-curve" of rising expectations: the 1968 revolution whetted the nation's appetite for reform. Because that reform was aborted, botched, and unfinished, (especially in regard to agrarian reform in the highlands), frustration with unfulfilled hopes was intensified. But there is no escaping the conclusion that the war happened because Sendero made it happen: because a disciplined, committed, militant, and ideologically-motivated movement was determined to launch a revolution. Sendero prepared for that war carefully, chose the most propitious moment in which to inaugurate it, and once it began, was prepared to make any sacrifice (la cuota) to ensure its success, no matter how long it took. Without Abimael Guzmán, without Gonzalo thought, without the two-line struggle, there would have been no Shining Path.

Second, Sendero was remarkably successful in waging guerrilla war, but it was not perfect, and it made many mistakes. It was helped enormously in its struggle by successive Peruvian governments, which first ignored it, gave it time to grow and establish itself, and then mishandled the situation in the very worst way. Over and over again the state's
response only helped Shining Path. A leitmotif running through the literature on Sendero as early as 1981, and the conclusion of virtually every social scientist who studied it, is that Sendero's war was a political one, and could only be resolved through political solutions, not by military means. The Peruvian military ignored the example of the successful British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaysia, and consistently chose a harsher, more punitive, more repressive policy. The guerra sucia carried out in the highlands made thousands hate and fear their own government. For a decade the military and the civilians could not decide upon a realistic strategy to fight Sendero's threat, or commit the resources to make any strategy effective.

For people to commit themselves to such a bloody and terrible movement as Sendero Luminoso was a serious decision. Had the government shown some willingness to improve people's lives, Sendero could not have gathered as much support as it did in the countryside. People probably did not have unrealistic expectations; they did not expect the government to work miracles, to magically lift them out of poverty. But they expected it to do something. An electrical transmission line, a source of clean water, a medical clinic, a rural school, a sewer line: these things might have averted the revolution in some villages and barrios. But the state did nothing, or worse, it sent in policemen and soldiers who didn't speak Quechua, and who didn't care what they did to people they didn't regard as fellow countrymen. It is notable that by 1990, support for the guerrillas dropped dramatically in places where even small efforts at civic action had been made.

Third, Peru has been profoundly changed by a decade of people's war. Thousands of Peruvians have learned the hard way that the government of their country cannot, or will not, do anything for them. It cannot protect them, keep order, or provide them with food, shelter, education, or health care. If they want these things, they will have to obtain them by their own efforts. The real victory of the people is not an Andean Kampuchea, but the explosive growth of popular organizations throughout rural and urban Peru: the neighborhood associations, clinics, schools, soup kitchens and self-defense patrols which emerged in the 1980's and 1990's. In many different ways, people have empowered themselves, and the government cannot take that away from them. One report on the rondas campesinas mentioned that the government had announced that the arms supplied to the patrols were only a loan, and that it wanted them back after the war. Whether the government can realistically expect to get its weapons back is an interesting question. The rondas have the obvious potential to become more than merely self-defense patrols, and in some places they have already made that transition.

And last, in some perverse way Sendero has won a victory, although it is not the victory it sought. No one in Peru can claim any longer to be ignorant of the way the "other half" of the country lives. The highlands have been brought to Lima, literally and figuratively. Literally, because thousands of Indians have fled their villages and settled in squalid shantytowns around the capital and other cities; figuratively, because the plight of the peasantry, la mancha india or Indian stain, as the highlands have been called, has been made starkly clear to the nation's middle and upper classes. Whether they chose to do anything about it is another matter, but the "two Perus" have been forced to acknowledge their mutual existence. Nothing can alter that fact. What is unbearably tragic is that Guzmán's "river of blood," and untold human suffering, were apparently necessary to achieve that recognition.