The Yanomami and the Future of Brazilian Democracy
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In a dramatic gesture on Brazil's "Day of the Indian" (April 19), President Fernando Collor announced that he was revoking a series of decrees issued by his predecessor Jose Sarney that had expropriated most of the land of the Yanomami, one of the most isolated indigenous nations of Amazonia, and thrown it open to invasion by hordes of miners (NYT April 21).

Knowledgable observers noted skeptically that Collor was only belatedly complying with 18 month-old decisions of Brazilian Federal Courts that the decrees were illegal, and that he had postponed giving the Yanomami legal title to the land for six months to allow the government to "restudy" the question of the boundaries of Yanomami country. Given that these boundaries had been officially delimited by the Brazilian government on the basis of a thorough study as recently as 1985, the call for a new study was widely seen as a pretext for yet another raid on Yanomami land.

The struggle over the future of the Yanomami and their country that underlies the ambiguities of President Collor's announcement, however, is fraught with unusual political significance, with implications that extend far beyond the Yanomami to the future of Brazilian democracy itself.

Yanomami country has in effect become the battleground of a fundamental challenge to the constitutional authority of the new democratic regime by the military and economic forces identified with the military dictatorship that nominally yielded power in 1984. This challenge is embodied in a vast clandestine military project, Projeto Calha Norte ("Northern Headwaters"), that places the northern 20% of the total area of Brazil under military control. The project was secretly approved by former President Sarney in 1985. Its full scope and intentions remain mysterious. Among its known goals, however, are the reshaping of environmental and indigenous policies in conformity with the interests of "national security" as defined by the military.

This means, in principle, the massive exploitation of the natural resources of Amazonia to support the economic development of the rest of the country, and the assimilation of the remaining culturally distinct indigenous nations through the settlement and exploitation of their lands by ethnic Brazilians. What it means in practice can be seen by what is happening to the Yanomami. The largest Amazonian nation still living in relative isolation, they are presently being wiped out at a rate that will annihilate their entire population (almost 10,000 in 1986) within the next ten years. The Federal Prosecutor of Brazil has denounced the government policies responsible for this situation as "genocidal". Sarney's decrees, which gave rise to this situation, were clearly unconstitutional under Brazil's 1986 democratic constitution, which guarantees to indigenous peoples the land necessary to sustain their cultural way of life. The legality of the decrees was challenged by the Federal Prosecutor of Brazil, and his challenge was upheld by a Federal Court. Why then has the Collor government waited until now to take its first, timid step toward undoing this horrific and criminal situation? And why is another "study" of Yanomami
boundaries needed, unless Collor is hoping to use it as a cover for yet another surrender to the military's demands for the dismemberment of Yanomami territory?

These questions point beyond the agony of the Yanomami to the formidable power of the economic and military forces at work to undo and reverse Brazil's turn towards democracy and constitutional legality. The fate of the Yanomami has thus become an issue of historic importance for Brazil. The Yanomami, however, cannot wait for history. If they are left to die while the government temporizes, Brazilian democracy may suffer a mortal wound.