

THE LAST FRONTIER: LAND WARS IN THE AMAZON

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INTRODUCTION

THE LAST FRONTIER: LAND WARS IN THE AMAZON is a sixty-minute documentary work-in-progress that looks at the most recent chapter in a five century conquest: the push to develop and colonize the untouched heartland of South America. Whereas past documentary projects examining this region have taken an environmentalist perspective, this program will analyze the social phenomena of frontier expansion and the human consequences of that process.

APPROACH

As a one hour PBS special, THE LAST FRONTIER will provide American audiences with an understanding of a basic process in the development of civilization: the movement of larger, more powerful tribes, nations or empires into frontier areas in a manner threatening to the physical and cultural extinction of weaker groups. This process has been accelerated by Western technology but mankind has not taken the time to consider either the human consequences of such actions or potential alternative strategies. Through interviews with anthropologists, development strategists, government officials, historians, industrialists as well as peasant and Indian leaders, this program will give viewers insights into the human dimension of this process as well as expose its relevance to future efforts to develop remaining frontier areas of the world.

BACKGROUND

The current conflicts in the Amazon are strikingly similar to those of the Western territories of North America in the 19th century: pioneer communities and Indian populations are fighting large landowners for contested lands. As was the situation with the United States, this region remains on the periphery of civil society, outside the realm of its traditional mediating institutions. Civil courts, police and government regulating agencies have little impact in these contested areas.

Escalating problems in 1988 include human rights abuses and the continued uncontrolled exposure of indigenous groups to Western technology and disease. THE LAST FRONTIER will document these problems while analyzing two areas of land conflict involving peasant and indigenous populations.

-- Conceição do Araquuaia, Southern Pará:

The origin of land conflicts affecting this peasant community dates back to the construction of the Transamazon Highway in the early 1970's. The Brazilian government's highly publicized campaign to encourage the immigration of landless farmers in search of small plots led to a massive migration into a region that had remained virtually untouched for one hundred million years. The problems began to occur in the late 1970's when the government changed its priorities, gave less support to federally funded colonization projects, and started to support the expansion of large-scale cattle ranch investments in the Amazon Region. From this time and until today the peasants no longer have the support of the federal government and have had to start fending for themselves.

Disputes over land are often settled through armed conflicts between "posseiros" (peasants) and "pistoleiros" (hired gunmen). The Catholic Church is currently working with the peasant population providing legal representation and documenting human right abuses. A self-proclaimed vigilante organization of large-scale cattle ranchers, the Rural Democratic Union (UDR), is working in direct opposition to the efforts of the Church. In 1980, murders resulting from land-related conflicts throughout Brazil totaled 82 persons. By 1986 that number had jumped to 272 persons including a priest, two nuns, four lawyers and fourteen union officials. No exact figures are yet available for 1987.

-- Yanomamo Territory, Roraima:

The Yanomamo are the largest unacculturated tribe in South America. Recent estimates put their population at approximately 17,000, most of whom have never had contact with non-Indians. They are also a group that has received wide exposure in the United States as a result of anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon's classic 1968 ethnography YANOMAMO: THE FIERCE PEOPLE. But in the years following Chagnon's initial work, the Yanomamo have been struggling to maintain control over their native lands.

The Brazilian Indians first contacts with outsiders date back to the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500. At that time there were approximately 3 to 5 million Indians in Brazil. By 1900 disease and genocide had reduced the number of Indians to 1 million. By 1960 their population had been reduced to 200,000. In the case of the Yanomamo, their first contact with the "outside world" was made with Portuguese explorers in 1707. Their survival as a people has been attributed to their ability to avoid contact situations by retreating further and further into the interior of the Amazon Region. They are currently located between the Orinoco and Maravia Rivers in the dense tropical forest of Northern Brazil.

The first persons to settle on Yanomamo territory were Catholic priests and North American missionaries in the 1950's. Pioneers, prospectors and hunters soon followed in the 1960's. A project to build a road through Yanomamo lands (the Northern Perimeter Highway) that was abandoned in the 1970's is now under serious reconsideration by the present government. 13 Yanomamo villages were contacted when initial work began in 1972. With no medical supervision, 60 Indians died from exposure to foreign disease in the first year. After two years, only 8 families remained in the villages. The rest had either succumbed to the epidemic or retreated further into the interior. In another area during the same period, 80 Yanomamo died of tuberculosis while others contracted venereal diseases from highway workers.

With no coherent policy worked out for the Yanomamo, the future does not look promising. Cassiterite (the principal ore of tin) was discovered on Yanomamo lands in 1975. This resulted in an influx of hundreds of miners. In 1980 and 1981 the discovery of gold brought the number of miners to approximately 3,000. From this time until today a pitched battle over the future of Yanomamo lands has taken place between anthropologists, missionaries and Indian rights groups on one side and the government and mining companies on the other. Armed conflicts between the Yanomamo (who obtain guns through trading) and the miners have been occurring with some frequency. In August of 1987, four Yanomamo and one miner were killed during a land dispute on Indian territory. On April 3, 1988 the London Sunday Observer reported that 15 Yanomamo were killed and 20 injured after 20 miners attacked a group of 100 unarmed Yanomamo men, women and children.

SIGNIFICANCE

It was only in the late 1960's and early 1970's that the American people began to understand as a nation the true extent of the devastation and destruction attendant to the development of our Western Territories in the 19th century. By analyzing and documenting the current development problems in the Amazon, THE LAST FRONTIER will provide American audiences with an understanding of a process that is a mirror image of what took place in our own country. Of equal importance is that Brazil is currently making a tenuous transition to democracy after twenty years of military dictatorship. The future of the people presently living in the Amazon Region is one of the most hotly contested issues being decided upon in Brazil's new constitution. This program will be tracking that debate so as to provide American audiences with key insights into the future of the largest remaining frontier area of the world.

VISUALIZATION

The film makers will employ a stylistic approach that captures reality in its most immediate form. Emphasis will be placed on documenting scenes rather than collecting what is commonly referred to in television as "B-roll" or "wall-paper". The intention will be to capture events as they are unfolding in order to draw the viewer into the reality of the issues presented in the program. This material will not serve to simply illustrate the interviews or the narration, but will complement them while providing information that further reveals the complexity of the issues. Whenever possible interviews will take place in the field in order to convey this sense of immediacy.

This approach is best exemplified in the excerpt from the work-in-progress. In this 8 1/2 minute segment documenting the murder of one man, the viewer is given a micro-perspective analysis of one incident which reveals the larger issues of rural violence and its impact on a family, human rights, agrarian reform, the role of the Catholic Church and a historical perspective on the immigration of landless peasants into this region of Brazil.