War-time Rubber Exploitation in Tropical America

From April, 1942, through August, 1944, when the world's great source of rubber in Malaya and adjacent areas was not available, the United States obtained 32% of its needs from tropical American countries, 15% from Liberia and the remainder from Ceylon, India and African sources other than Liberia.

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History
The capture of the world's leading rubber-plantation areas, those of southeastern Asia and adjacent islands, by the Japanese in early 1942 closed 90% of the world's rubber supply to the Allied Powers. As a result of the rubber famine thus induced, the United States Government took immediate action to resuscitate the moribund Latin American sources of rubber which had languished for nearly a quarter of a century in the face of their inability to produce rubber as cheap as that from the Far East. The task of developing the Latin American rubber resources during World War II was assigned to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, first through its subsidiary, the Rubber Reserve Company (prior to February, 1943), then to a new subsidiary, the Rubber Development Corporation, organized in February, 1943. The operations of these agencies in Latin American countries were conducted within the framework of contracts concluded between the United States Government and the governments of rubber-producing Latin American countries and the colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad.

These contracts had four principal objectives: a) to centralize rubber exploitation and to arrange a uniformity in production methods, whenever desirable, in the various countries; b) to fix prices paid for rubber and thus to prevent uncontrolled price inflation and private speculation; c) to furnish technical advisers and supplies required for rubber production to rubber-producing countries; d) to prevent Axis agents and sympathizers from securing rubber for their countries or from destroying rubber to prevent its reaching the Allied Powers.

The principal terms of these contracts, which were virtually the same for all countries involved, may be summarized thus:

1. The rubber-producing countries of Latin America agreed:
   a) To sell all their exportable surplus of crude rubber to the United States for a fixed period;
   b) to initiate an internal system of rationing and conservation of rubber and rubber products;
   c) to waive customs duties on all imports of supplies by agents of the Rubber Development Corporation for purposes of rubber production;
   d) to render all possible aid through local governmental agencies and officials to agents of the Rubber Development Corporation.
Fig. 1 (Upper). *Hevea brasiliensis* estate in British Guiana, after clearing of undergrowth.

Fig. 2 (Lower). "Opening" a large *Hevea* tree. Note half-spiral cut, vertical latex channel, spout and latex receptacle.