

NOV 27 1954

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Freedom of the Seas

MR. ONASSIS and his whaling fleet have made world news. There is something fascinating about a private individual who battles against sovereign nations in distant seas. Mr Onassis, moreover, has managed to complicate a number of countries in his venture and the resulting situation is an international lawyer's nightmare. An Argentine citizen, of Greek origin, resident in France, and whose ships fly a Panamanian flag and carry German crews and British insurance, has been attacked at sea by Peru, which is supported by Ecuador and Chile, in the little Peruvian port of Bayta. Five captured ships, including the factory-ship *Challic Challenger*, were held last week under the guns of three destroyers. Members of the German and Panamanian legations in Peru tried to get on board. Representatives of Lloyd's apparently succeeded in it, but that the seizure of Mr Onassis's ships. His costing, London underwriters some £11,000 a day. Off Panama, the remaining 10 ships of the Onassis fleet are waiting for orders. In the Inter-American conference at Rio and in the corridors of the United Nations, legal consultants are preparing for a major international controversy.

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But despite the comic-opera atmosphere, there are serious aspects to Mr Onassis's latest adventure. It is not yet clear whether the Onassis fleet ever approached within 200 miles of the Peruvian coast. But even if it did, this would merely have meant challenging one of the most absurd claims ever put forward in international law. By placing the limit of territorial waters 200 miles off their coasts, Peru, Ecuador and Chile are scaling off more than a million square miles of open sea. Britain has, on some previous occasions, been prepared to challenge the claims of any country to more than three miles of territorial water. Will it accept the preposterous idea of a vast area of forbidden sea down the whole western flank of South America?

The United Kingdom's interest in this affair is a double one; it must concern itself with the losses arbitrarily inflicted on London underwriters as well as with the broad principles of the freedom of the seas. In the "bad old days" of Palmerston and Don Pacifico, a British squadron would doubtless have appeared off Payta. Quieter representations are in vogue nowadays. This country's relations with Peru have been good in recent years, and trade between the two has developed to the profit of both. In that light, it is surely to be hoped that Peru will review its stand and accept the principle that freedom of the open seas is to everybody's advantage.