The population of the Amazon Rainforest became predominantly urban in the twentieth century. In Brazil and Peru, the two countries that comprise the majority of Amazonia, 80% of the region’s people now live in cities. Accelerated urbanization and economic dynamism finally took off after decades of urban decline after the end of the Amazon Rubber Boom (c. 1850-1920). Far from inevitable, city growth was driven by contingent local and national sociopolitical processes, deliberate developmental and geopolitical agendas, and policy decisions. Through a comparative focus on the diverging histories of Manaus, Brazil, and Iquitos, Peru, the largest Amazonian cities in each country and in the Upper Amazon, I argue that the military dictatorships that ruled Brazil (1964-1985) and Peru (1968-1980) constituted critical junctures in this process. Paying particular attention to the political, social and environmental histories of Iquitos and Manaus and to their relationships with their hinterlands, I show how the military regimes set Manaus and Iquitos, and their vast rainforest surroundings, into different, long-lasting developmental paths.