



48 SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

1783 - 1830

Simón Bolívar is often called “the George Washington of South America” because of his role in the liberation of five South American countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia) from Spanish rule. Few, if any, political figures have played so dominant a role in the history of an entire continent as he did.

Bolívar was born in 1783, in Caracas, Venezuela, into an aristocratic family of Spanish descent. He was orphaned at the age of nine. During his formative years, Bolívar was strongly influenced by the ideas and ideals of the French Enlightenment. Among the philosophers whose works he read were John Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu.

As a young man, Bolívar visited several European countries. In Rome, in 1805, at the top of the Aventine Hill, Bolívar made

his celebrated vow that he would not rest until his fatherland had been liberated from Spain.

In 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain and placed his own brother at the head of the Spanish government. By dislodging the Spanish royal family from effective political power, Napoleon provided the South American colonies with a golden opportunity to strike out for their own political independence.

The revolution against Spanish rule in Venezuela commenced in 1810, when the Spanish governor of Venezuela was deposed. A formal declaration of independence was made in 1811, and that same year Bolívar became an officer in the revolutionary army. But the following year, the Spanish troops regained control of Venezuela. The leader of the revolution, Francisco Miranda, was jailed, and Bolívar fled the country.

The succeeding years witnessed a series of wars, in which temporary victories were followed by crushing defeats. Nevertheless, Bolívar's resolution never wavered. The turning point came in 1819, when Bolívar led his small, ragtag army across rivers, plains, and the high passes of the Andes in order to attack the Spanish troops in Colombia. There he won the crucial Battle of Boyaca (August 7, 1819), the true turning point of the struggle. Venezuela was liberated in 1821, and Ecuador in 1822.

Meanwhile, the Argentine patriot José de San Martín had secured the freedom of Argentina and Chile from Spanish rule, and had undertaken the liberation of Peru. The two liberators met in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, in the summer of 1822. However, they were unable to agree on a plan for cooperating and coordinating their efforts against the Spanish. Since San Martín was unwilling to engage in a power struggle with the ambitious Bolívar (which would only have aided the Spanish), he decided to resign his command and withdraw from South America completely. By 1824, Bolívar's armies had completed the liberation of what is now Peru, and in 1825, the Spanish troops in Upper Peru (present-day Bolivia) were routed.

The remaining years of Bolívar's career were less successful. He had been impressed by the example of the United States of

America, and looked forward to a federation of the new South American nations. In fact, Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador had already been formed into a Republic of Greater Colombia, with Bolívar as president. Unfortunately, the centrifugal tendencies in South America were far greater than they had been in the North American colonies. When Bolívar convoked a Congress of Spanish American States in 1826, only four nations attended. Indeed, rather than more nations joining Greater Colombia, the republic itself soon began to break up. Civil war broke out, and in 1828, an attempt was made to assassinate Bolívar. By 1830, Venezuela and Ecuador had seceded. Bolívar, realizing that he himself was an obstacle to peace, resigned in April 1830. When he died, in December 1830, he was discouraged, impoverished, and exiled from his native Venezuela.

Bolívar was clearly a very ambitious man, and under the exigencies of the times, he sometimes assumed dictatorial powers. Nevertheless, when it came to a choice, he was willing to subordinate his personal ambitions to the public welfare and the ideal of democracy, and he invariably relinquished his dictatorial powers. He was once offered a throne, but declined it. Doubtless, he felt that the name "El Libertador" (the Liberator), which had already been bestowed upon him, was a greater honor than any kingly title.

There is no doubt that Bolívar was the dominant figure in the liberation of Spanish America from colonial rule. He provided the ideological leadership for the movement—writing articles, issuing a newspaper, making speeches, and writing letters. He was tireless in raising funds to support the struggle. And he was the principal military leader of the revolutionary forces.

Still, it would be a mistake to think of Bolívar as a great general. The armies he defeated were neither large nor well-led. Bolívar himself was not particularly talented in either strategy or tactics. (This is hardly surprising, since he had never received any military training.) But Bolívar made up for all his other shortcomings by his indomitable spirit in the face of adversity. After each defeat by the Spanish, when others were willing to

abandon the fight, Bolívar resolutely reassembled an army and continued the struggle.

In my opinion, Bolívar was far more influential than such famous figures as Julius Caesar or Charlemagne, both because the changes resulting from his career have proven more permanent, and because the regions affected cover a larger area. However, Bolívar has been ranked below Alexander the Great, Adolf Hitler, and Napoleon, since many of the things that those three men did would not have occurred without them, while it is difficult to believe that the South American countries would not eventually have achieved their independence anyway.

The most interesting and significant comparison to make is between Bolívar and George Washington. Like Washington, Bolívar commanded small and poorly-trained armies. Money was short, and it frequently required an inspiring leader to keep the army together at all.

Unlike Washington, Bolívar freed all his own slaves during his lifetime. In addition, by proclamation and by constitutional provision, he actively tried to abolish slavery in the lands he liberated. His attempts were not wholly successful, and slavery still existed in the region when he died.

Bolívar had a complex and interesting personality—dramatic, daring, and romantic. A handsome man, he had numerous love affairs. He was a far-sighted idealist, but had less administrative ability than Washington, and enjoyed flattery more. He was far more ambitious than Washington—to the disadvantage of the regions that he liberated. On the other hand, Bolívar was utterly uninterested in financial gain. He was wealthy when he entered politics, poor when he retired.

The territory that Bolívar freed from colonial rule was considerably larger than that of the original United States. Nevertheless, it is clear that he is a considerably less important figure than Washington, simply because the United States has played a far more important role in history than the countries liberated by Bolívar.