

Leadership Profile

Simón Bolívar (1783 - 1830)

Venezuelan Revolutionary Leader and Statesman
“Discourse of Angostura” - 1819

Introduction and Historical Background

Simón Bolívar, along with José de San Martín, was the most important leader of the Latin American Independence. Both Bolívar — who led the revolutionary war in the northern region of the Southern Cone, from Venezuela to Perú — and San Martín — who led the war in the south, from Argentina to Chile — have been rightly described as the *Libertadores* (“Liberators”) of Latin America. Born in Caracas, Venezuela on July 24, 1783, and raised in an affluent family which not only owned extensive land, but also some slaves, the young Bolívar was able, despite his background, to break with his privileged position and lead the people of five countries — Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, and Bolivia — toward their liberation and independence.

Endowed with an almost innate capacity for grasping social and political problems and mentored by such gifted teachers as Simón Rodríguez, the young revolutionary became a visionary for the region. He also showed precocious and extraordinary skills for interacting with many types of people, skills which later in life would make him into a very popular leader. Bolívar was a man of action and of intellect. Apart from being a brilliant military strategist and statesman, he was also man of letters, not unlike the North American revolutionaries and statesmen George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. The Liberator Bolívar has left a magnificent collection of writings, speeches, letters, manifestos, and poems, where he laid out the ideals of his struggle and his vision for a unified and free United States of South America.

Indeed, Bolívar saw from early in his life the negative consequences of Spanish colonialism:

exploitation, dependency, and above all, the unjust political system allowing a foreign power to impose its rule over a dominated people, preventing them from finding their own political identity and destiny. At the same time, Bolívar understood the negative consequences of the exaggerated regionalism and rivalries among local leaders that led, in most cases, to balkanization, disintegration, lack of unity, and even anarchy. Most importantly to Bolívar, neither foreign oppressive rule nor internal disharmony were conducive towards providing the proper education for a free people, a high priority for Bolívar, who saw it as a necessary prerequisite for liberty, as he writes in his *Discourse of Angostura*: only “proper morals, and *not force*, are the bases of law; and that to practice justice is to practice liberty.”

The events surrounding Bolívar’s speech at the Second National Congress in Angostura on February 15, 1819, highlight it as an outstanding example of political leadership during the foundation of a republic in a time of crisis. After declaring its independence through a Congress of patriots in 1811, Venezuela went through a period of continued unrest and instability.

The first source of unrest came in the wake of the declaration of independence, which triggered an almost immediate — and violent — royalist reaction. Spain sent troops immediately to crush the Venezuelan rebels who were defeated despite the heroic efforts of their leader, Francisco de Miranda. Bolívar himself fled first to New Granada (present-day Colombia), and then to the island of Jamaica to escape the fury of the royalist troops.

The second source of unrest and instability came from internal rivalries and disputes among the strong regional leaders (*caudillos*), making the struggle against the Spaniards all the more difficult.

By the end of the decade, nevertheless, the war began to favor the revolutionary cause, thanks in large part to Bolívar's determination and capacity for leadership. He began to rally the support of those regional *caudillos*, such as José Antonio Páez and his "llaneros," and began building a unified front. But the final battles in the war for independence still lay ahead. Bolívar longed for political unity. His ultimate ambition was to have a single nation, a sort of United States, but in Latin America. The continued violence and disappointment of the Venezuelan struggle led the Liberator to believe that only a centralized government representing all regions could keep at bay all anarchical tendencies and create a truly free and just society.

The Discourse of Angostura (a city where Bolívar set up his headquarters) addressed precisely those problems of instability and disunity that the leaders of the struggle for independence were facing. By that time Bolívar was about to launch a final war for the liberation of Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. The long march of his army, from Venezuela to Colombia, would represent one of the most extraordinary epic stories of Latin American history. His speech is imbued with a unifying spirit, a yearning for harmony and integration and it lays out his philosophy of leadership and governance clearly.

Near the end of his long, final march and at the peak of the Independence struggle, Bolívar held an historic meeting with José de San Martín in the city in Guayaquil, Ecuador in July, 1822; both Bolívar and San Martín discussed the future of Spanish America, sharing their visions for the continent. The urgent dilemma for the *Libertadores* was not only a military, but a political one — the issue of governance and what would be the best system to cope with the prevalent anarchy and both satisfy and reduce the ambitions of local *caudillos* trying to fill the power vacuum left by the Spanish colonial rule? Bolívar's philosophy and temperament toward the issues of governance differed considerably from San Martín's. José de San Martín agreed with Bolívar that the new free countries needed a strong, centralized form of government, but unlike Bolívar, he favored a monarchical system. His rationale for this, according to San Martín, appealed to the sense of tradition Spanish America inherited

from Spain. A Spanish American monarchy would pass on a sense of cultural continuity while, at the same time, be independent. "It is my opinion," San Martín once said, "that the country will find neither quiet, freedom, nor prosperity, except under the monarchical form of government." Thus, similar to leaders such as the Mexican Agustín de Iturbide and the Chilean Bernardo O'Higgins, San Martín favored a monarchical system to solve the widespread political instability, rivalries, and chaos after the Independence. This profound ideological line between monarchists and republicans, populists versus nationalists divided their generation.

Committed to the idea that a strong leadership was needed, Bolívar all the same supported a republican form that had some non-democratic elements. A monarchy would be incompatible with the idea of freedom the *Libertadores* had long fought for and yet "Bolívarian" republicanism would be unique and distinct from the North American federal system. Bolívar's vision was eclectic, using ideas from older republics: from the Romans, an emphasis on order, and from the French, modern constitutionalism which encouraged the cultivation of civic virtue. From Montesquieu and Plato, Rousseau and Burke, he mixed together sometimes-dissimilar elements to provide a distinctive model for his own leadership and for the government of the South American nations. He was a republican, populist, and aristocrat, all at the same time as evidenced by his ideas for a strong executive branch, a permanent presidency, and his proposal of a hereditary, not an elective, Senate resembles Plato's ideal city-state in the *Republic*. Similarly, Bolívar advised that the citizenry should acquire intellectual and moral virtues through "enlightened education," clearly following in Montesquieu's footsteps. Was Bolívar pessimistic and, above all, elitist regarding the possibilities of a democratic system for a liberated Spanish America? Perhaps, but his views were that of a statesman and of a leader who tried to balance the extremes between anarchy and tyranny. Whatever the case may be, some accounts have portrayed the *Libertador* very disillusioned at the end of this life, in the face of the enduring instability of Latin America: "America is ungovernable," he lamented in 1830, "those who have served the revolution have plowed the sea."

Points to Consider

- ▶ Do you agree with Bolívar’s partial rejection of democratic government? Of North American federalism? Why or why not?
- ▶ To Bolívar, what role does education have in shaping the character of a leader?
- ▶ Why does Bolívar believe it will be very difficult to establish just and fair government in South America? What qualities will leaders in South America need to overcome these challenges?
- ▶ Compare the leadership qualities that Plato talks about in the Classic Case for this unit with those suggested by Bolívar.
- ▶ What were the particular challenges Latin America was facing according to Bolívar?

“Discourse of Angostura,” 1819 (Excerpts)

A Speech by Simón Bolívar to the Second National Congress of Venezuela Translated by Frederick H. Fornoff

Bolívar proposes his vision for a national republican constitution . . .

“[W]e are not Europeans, nor Indians, but a species halfway between aboriginal and Spanish. Americans by birth and Europeans by law, we find ourselves contending with the natives for titles of ownership and at the same time trying to maintain our rights in our birth country against the opposition of the invaders; thus our case is most extraordinary and complex. But there is more; our lot has always been purely passive, our political existence nonexistent, so we find ourselves all the more disadvantaged in our quest for freedom because we have always occupied a station lower than that of servants. They took away not only our freedom but even the possibility of exercising an active domestic [rule].”

On the evil of paternalism and the consequences of colonial rule . . .

“In an absolute regime, the authorized power acknowledges no limits. The will of the despot is the supreme law implemented arbitrarily by the subordinates who participate in the organized oppression by virtue of the authority they enjoy. They control all civil, political, military, and religious functions; but the fact is, the Satraps of Persia are Persian, the Pashas of the Grand Turk are Turks, and the Sultans of Tartary are Tartars. China does not seek out Mandarins from the birthplace of Ghengis Khan, who conquered her. To the contrary, in America, everything was received from Spain, which in a very real sense deprived her of the pleasure of exercising active [rule], since we were given no role in our domestic affairs and internal administration. This deprivation made it impossible for us to understand the operation of public affairs; neither could we enjoy the personal consideration that the sheen of power inspires in the eyes of the multitudes and that is of such importance in great revolutions. I will say it just once: We were kept apart, in total ignorance of everything related to the science of government.

“Enslaved by the triple yoke of ignorance, tyranny, and vice, we American people have never experienced knowledge, power, or virtue. As disciples of this pernicious trio of masters, the lessons we learned and the examples we followed have been purely destructive. We’ve been ruled more by deceit than power and corrupted more by vice than by superstition. Slavery is the daughter of darkness. An ignorant people is the blind instrument of its own destruction. Ambition and intrigue exploit the credulity and inexperience of men totally bereft of political, economic, or civil knowledge. They mistake pure illusion for reality, license for freedom, treason for patriotism, vengeance for justice. Like a robust blind man deluded by his sense of power, they march forward as confidently as the most clear-sighted, and bouncing from reef to reef, they are unable to find the way. A corrupt people can indeed attain freedom but lose it at once. We endeavor in vain to show them that happiness consists in the practice of virtue, that the rule of law is more powerful than the rule of tyrants because the former is inflexible and everything must yield to its beneficent rigor, that good habits, not force, are the columns of

the law, and finally that the practice of justice is the practice of freedom. Hence, legislators, your task is all the more difficult in that you have to reform men perverted by the illusions of error and unhealthy desire. Freedom, says Rousseau, is a succulent food but hard to digest.”

Is Democracy a good system of government?

“Many ancient and modern nations have shaken off oppression, but rare are those that have succeeded in enjoying even a few precious moments of freedom; almost at once they’ve fallen back into their former political vices, because it is the people, not their governments, who drag tyranny in tow. The habit of domination makes them oblivious to the charms of honor and national prosperity, and they are indifferent to the glory of experiencing true freedom, under the tutelage of laws dictated by their own will. The annals of world history proclaim this appalling truth. Only democracy, in my opinion, is conducive to absolute freedom. But was there ever a democratic government that succeeded in conjoining power, prosperity, and permanence? And on the contrary, have we not seen aristocracies and monarchies hold together grand and powerful empires that lasted for centuries and centuries? Is there any government more ancient than China’s? Has there ever been a republic that endured longer than that of Sparta or Venice? Did not the Roman Empire conquer the whole world? Hasn’t France had fourteen centuries of monarchy? Who is greater than England? These nations, however, were or still are aristocracies and monarchies.”

On political models and historical circumstances . . .

“Although that country [the United States] is a singular model of political and moral virtue, and though freedom was its cradle and its nursery, and though it is nourished on pure freedom — in brief, although in many respects that nation is unique in the history of the human race — it is a miracle, I repeat, that a system as weak and complex as federalism ever managed to guide it through circumstances as difficult and delicate as those of its recent past. But I should say that however successful this form of government proved for North America, it never entered my mind to compare the situation

and nature of two states as diametrically different as English America and Spanish America. Would it not be difficult to apply to Spain England’s political, civil, and religious Charter of Liberties? Well, it is even more difficult to adapt the laws of North America to Venezuela. Do we not read in the Spirit of the Laws that they must be suitable to the country for which they are written? That it is an astonishing coincidence for the laws of one nation to be applicable to another? That they must take into account the physical aspect of the country, its climate, the nature of its terrain, its location, size, and the way of life of its people? That they must reflect the degree of freedom that the constitution can support, the religion of the inhabitants as well as their inclinations, their standard of living, their number, their commerce, their customs, and their character? This then is the code we should consult, not the one written for Washington!”

On the reasons for a hereditary senate . . .

“It would require no alteration in our basic laws to adopt a legislature similar to the British parliament. Like the North Americans, we have divided the national congress into two chambers: the chamber of representatives and the senate. The first is very wisely structured: it enjoys all the powers appropriate to it and is not in need of reform, since the constitution conferred on it the origin, form, and functions demanded by the people to ensure that their wishes would be legitimately and effectively represented. If the senate were hereditary instead of elective, it would, I think, be the base, the bond, and the soul of our republic. During political upheavals, this body would deflect lightning away from the government and repulse the waves of popular unrest. Loyal to the government out of a vested interest in its own preservation it would always resist any attempted incursions by the people against the jurisdiction and authority of the magistrates. ...

“...The creation of a hereditary senate would in no way violate the principle of political equality; it is not my wish to establish a noble class: to do that, as a famous republican has said, would be to destroy equality and freedom simultaneously. I wish, rather, to point out that it is a profession demanding great knowledge and the means adequate to obtain

such instruction. We should not leave everything to chance and to the results of elections: The people are more gullible than nature perfected by art, and although it is true that they would have no monopoly on virtue, it is also true that they would have the advantage of an enlightened education.”

On the character of a republican president and the need for strong institutions . . .

“A republican president is an individual isolated within society, yet charged with restraining the impetus of the people toward rampant license and the proclivity of judges and administrators toward abuse of the laws. He is directly responsible to the legislative body, the senate, and the people — one man all alone weathering the combined force of divergent opinions, interests, and passions of society, who according to Carnot [French revolutionary general and administrator] does little more than struggle constantly against the desire to control and the desire to resist control. He is, in short, a single athlete striving against a multitude of athletes.

“Let the entire system of government be strengthened and permanent balance be established, lest its own fragility be the cause of its decadence. Precisely because no other form of government is as weak as democracy, its structure should be all the more solid and its institutions continually tested for stability. If we fail in this, we can be sure the result will be an experiment in government rather than a permanent system, an ungovernable, tumultuous, and anarchic society rather than a social institution in which happiness, peace, and justice rule.”

On the foundations of a republic . . .

“Popular education should be the highest concern of paternal love for our congress. Morality and enlightenment are the poles of a Republic; so morality and enlightenment are our first necessities. From Athens let us borrow her Areopagus [Greek council of judges] and the guardians of customs and laws; from Rome, her censors and domestic tribunals; and, using these moral institutions to form a holy alliance, let us renew in the world the idea of a people not content with merely being free and strong, but aspiring also to be virtuous. From Sparta, we will borrow her austere institutions,

and constructing from these three vital springs a fountain of virtue, let us endow our republic with a fourth power whose dominion is childhood and the hearts of men, public spirit, wholesome customs, and republican morality. Let us so constitute this Areopagus that it will keep vigil over the education of our children, over our national system of education, and purify the corrupted aspects of our republic, denouncing ingratitude, selfishness, coldness of affection for the country, idleness and negligence on the part of citizens, and condemn the causes of corruption and pernicious examples, correcting our customs with moral castigation, not only against those who violate them but also those who mock them, not only against those who attack them but also those who undermine them, not only against whatever violates the constitution but also whatever violates public respect.”

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