

# *Simón Bolívar's Quest for Glory*

Sample Pages

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## CHAPTER 1



# Introduction

## *Bolívar and Washington*

George Washington (1732–99) and Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) stand out as two great leaders of anticolonial struggles in the New World. Washington's fight to free the United States from British colonial rule is well known. Unfortunately, hardly known in the United States is Simón Bolívar's struggle to free half of South America from Spanish domination. Both men came from the landed elites of their respective nations, and both lost their fathers at an early age. As young soldiers, both men suffered discrimination serving in the armies of their colonial masters, and neither benefited from much formal military training. Despite Washington's distinguished service commanding the Virginia Regiment against French and Indian forces in the 1750s, the British army refused him a regular commission. The two keenly enjoyed the exhilaration of combat. As Washington put it, "I heard bullets whistle and believe me there is something charming in the sound." Bolívar said, "My glory has been in the leading of these brave soldiers. Neither vanity nor lust for power inspired me in this enterprise." As a commander, Washington inspired soldiers to persevere and win against long odds, as did Bolívar. The armies of both men included among their ranks Irish and other European volunteers. Both lost major battles and suffered other reversals, yet they fought to victory. In their twenties both faced serious defeat, Washington at Fort Mifflin and Bolívar at Puerto Cabello. Neither fathered any children.

Both held important military and political roles as commanders, writers of constitutions, and presidents. Washington commanded the victorious Continental army, presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and served as the new nation's first president. Grateful countrymen urged both men to accept royal crowns that they refused. Both faced powerful centrifugal political forces and divisive partisanship that threatened to destroy their new nations. As president, Washington faced down the so-called Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, asserting federal over local control. Angered by federal taxes, farmers in four counties of western Pennsylvania attacked federal officials. Washington mobilized nearly thirteen thousand troops and crushed the rebellion. Bolívar would be much less successful in holding together his beloved "Gran Colombia" (modern Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador). These men of the Enlightenment championed anticolonialism and fervently worked on behalf of republicanism, progress, reason, and freedom.

Despite the overall parallels in their careers, however, the two men also exhibited fundamental differences of personality and legacy. Washington's fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson clearly described his character and personality: "His mind was great and powerful . . . as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion. . . . Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration, was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose, whatever obstacles opposed." Although enemies accused him of imperial ambitions, the modest, almost self-effacing Washington clearly did not pursue his own personal fame. Upon taking command of the Continental army in 1775, he said, "I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room, that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with." Later, as president, he exercised power carefully, with an obvious concern, even anxiety, that his every action created a precedent.

In sharp contrast, Bolívar exhibited a rash, impulsive, mercurial nature that often thrust him into peril but at times lifted him to great victories. In fact, we suggest that he may have suffered from bipolar disorder, given the extreme swings in temperament and actions that characterized his life. Unlike the methodical, rational Washington, he seemed almost mystical and fatalistic in his worldview, trusting in his destiny and given to visions, such as his delirium at Chimborazo, the great mountain peak in Ecuador (see

chapter 12). Vain and proud, “the Liberator,” as he came to be called, relentlessly pursued his own dreams of personal glory with an almost messianic zeal. Bolívar himself recognized clearly how his path diverged from that of Washington. Addressing the Senate of Colombia on February 6, 1827, he sadly observed that “zealous republicans regard me with a secret fear, for history teaches them that men in my position have always been ambitious. In vain does Washington’s example rise in my defense, for, in truth, an occasional exception cannot stand up against the long history of a world that has always been oppressed by the powerful.”

While they share the halo of military glory, the political legacies of Washington and Bolívar diverge sharply. Washington served his country ably, prudently, and wisely as its first president. Refusing to run for a third term as president, he incarnated the principle of a nation of strong institutions, not strong men. “Steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world”—his warning to avoid foreign entanglements—set the tone for several generations of American foreign-policy makers.

Physically, the two men stood poles apart. Washington, pale and strong, towered beyond six feet in height. Bolívar stood at five and a half feet, compact, slight, often depicted as swarthy, with the quickness and demeanor of a bullfighter. His faithful aide-de-camp and confidant Daniel Florencio O’Leary described the mature Bolívar:

[His] forehead was very high but not unusually broad. It had many wrinkles. His eyebrows were thick, but well shaped; his eyes were dark and keen; his nose rather long and handsome. . . . His cheek bones were salient, his cheeks sunken ever since I first knew him. His mouth was ugly, his lips being thick, the upper one long. His teeth were regular, white and beautiful. He took particular care of them. His jaw bones and chin were long. His ears were large. His hair, which he wore long, was extremely black and curly. His whiskers and mustachios [were] light colored. . . . His chest was narrow and his whole figure thin, his legs particularly so. His skin was dark and rough, his hands and feet remarkably small and pretty. His countenance at times was pleasing, when in good humor. When irritated, it was ferocious. The change was incredible.

Intellectually, Bolívar seemed to recognize the danger of accumulating excessive political power. Writing on October 21, 1825, he acknowledged that “the Liberator of North America [Washington] was not in office that long—nor should I continue in office any longer, lest some should say that I am

more ambitious than he.” However, his seemingly visceral need to seek his own glory often sacrificed institutional growth for *personalismo*, a continuing problem in Latin American political culture. As he wrote on October 28, 1828, “As for me, I think that glory is a thousand times preferable to happiness.” His mania for power provoked assassination attempts, mutinies, and vile attacks on his character and policies. Washington exhibited an impeccable honesty and morality still admired, whereas Bolívar ordered heinous war crimes and lived his life as a profligate womanizer, even by the lax standards of his time.

Bolívar recognized the long strands of history that connected him to America’s first president. Writing to Lafayette on March 20, 1826, he expressed gratitude for a medallion of Washington that symbolized the connection between the two great freedom fighters.

From the public papers, I have learned, with inexpressible pleasure, that Your Excellency has been so kind as to honor me with a treasure from Mount Vernon: The image of Washington, some of his mementos, and one of the monuments to his glory are to be bestowed upon me by Your Excellency in memory of that great man, the New World’s foremost son. Words cannot express how greatly my heart cherishes so glorious an assembly of thoughts and objects. Washington’s family honors me in a manner far exceeding my remotest hopes, as a reward from Washington, given by the hand of Lafayette, is the ultimate in human compensations. He was the outstanding *citizen-hero*, the champion of freedom, who on the one hand has served America and on the other the Old World of Europe. What mortal then is deserving of the high honors which Your Excellency and Mount Vernon propose to confer upon me? My embarrassment is equaled only by the infinite sense of gratitude with which I tender Your excellency the respect and veneration due the Nestor of human freedom.

Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee, one of Washington’s officers, aptly summed up the general’s esteemed position: “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” Washington died a national hero, and, thanks to the hagiography of Parson (Mason L.) Weems, gained legendary status. People honored him as early as 1776 by giving the name Washington to their sons (as did Lafayette), towns, and ships. Paintings and statues that once depicted George III now featured George Washington, who lived well into his sixties.

Bolívar died at age forty-seven in political disgrace and poverty while awaiting a ship to carry him to European exile. He had sacrificed his family fortune of perhaps 200,000 pesos for the cause of freedom. Toward the end of his life, in dinner conversation with a young French officer named Louis Peru de Lacroix, Bolívar aptly summarized the forces that led him on his path to glory: “circumstances, my talent, my character, my passions are what put me on my way; my ambition, my constancy, and the ardor of my imagination made me continue and have sustained me.” Seeing Napoleon in his splendor made him “think of the slavery of my country and the glory that would befit the one who would liberate it.” At his death he had little more than charity, borrowed clothing, and a largely unworked copper mine as assets.

After his death, however, Latin Americans gradually began to realize the significance of Bolívar’s contributions and sacrifices. He is revered in the countries that he liberated: his native Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The latter country was named for him, and he drafted its constitution. Eventually Venezuela reburied him in a “Pantheon of Heroes” and named a city, province, and its national currency in his honor. He now has near godlike status as “the Liberator,” honored throughout Latin America.

In reality, the tarnished idol of Bolívar, Napoleon Bonaparte, perhaps offers a better basis of comparison than does Washington. The youthful Venezuelan first admired the courage and accomplishments of the ambitious Frenchman. However, disillusionment set in when Bonaparte abandoned his republican principles and crowned himself emperor. Bolívar would also face the temptations of absolute power and the allure of pursuing unfettered personal glory. Both men shared a warrior’s temperament that reveled in combat, conquest, and adoration that ultimately led them to political disgrace.

As then-president of Venezuela, Rafael Caldera wrote in 1993, Bolívar still remains the “highest expression” of Venezuelan national values, the inspiration for its constitution. Yet despite his great historical importance as an independence hero, Bolívar remains little known outside Latin America. This narrative biography brings his entire life and influence to the general reader, with special attention to his military career.

Bolívar proved equally adept at wielding the pen and the sword; however, he earned his glory on the fields of battle. Thus, much of our attention focuses on his military struggles to liberate South America from Spanish rule. His repeated comebacks from defeat, flashes of military genius, tremendous mood swings, persistence, near manic quest for glory, and fall

from political grace give his life an epic, tragic quality. Like the Spanish conquistadors before him, he looms larger than life. His political legacy remains hotly debated. He committed acts of almost unspeakable brutality, but no one would deny his historical significance.

We have tried to make Bolívar's life and times accessible and intelligible to general readers and students. Our goal is to transport the reader back to the places and times where the Liberator met triumph and defeat. Readers will encounter his supporters and enemies and cheer and cry along with Bolívar. The Liberator did not win Spanish American independence all by himself, so we have taken pains to introduce lesser-known people who also valiantly waged the battle against colonialism. We have kept scholarly accouterments to a minimum. Instead of a plethora of footnotes, there is a brief bibliographical essay that features other important sources in English and Spanish. The concluding bibliography lists all major works consulted as well as suggestions for further reading. A chronology of the Liberator's life and times, along with a glossary of Spanish terms, follows the main body of the text.

Bolívar, his allies, and his enemies left an immense corpus of writings, so we have quoted often from those primary sources. The historiography on Bolívar is likewise immense but also badly flawed. Specialists have explored virtually every facet of his life. Much of the writing about Bolívar is hagiography. It treats him as a godlike figure rather than as a human being. One example is the 1921 biography penned by Guillermo Antonio Sherwell (1878–1926). While we find much to admire in his courage, leadership, and vision, we try to represent his actions and character fully and accurately, blemishes and all.

Bolívar's compelling, eventful life reminds us powerfully that individuals make a difference in history. Bolívar recognized that "to understand revolutions and their participants, we must observe them at close range and judge them at great distance." We hope that this narrative of his life and times brings Bolívar into close range, the better to judge the long-term impact of his words, inspiration, and actions.