

Title:

Chavez's Inspiration - Simon Bolivar

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Summary:

Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) is a Latin American folk hero, revered for having been a revolutionary freedom fighter, a compassionate egalitarian and a successful politician.

Keywords:

Article Body:

Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) is a Latin American folk hero, revered for having been a revolutionary freedom fighter, a compassionate egalitarian and a successful politician. He is credited with the liberation from Spanish colonial yoke of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, a country named after him. Venezuela's new strongman, Hugo Chavez, renamed his country The Bolivarian republic of Venezuela to reflect the role of his "Bolivarian revolution".

Yet, while alive, Bolivar was a much hated dictator and - at the beginning of his career - a military failure.

His aide and friend, Gen. Daniel O'Leary, an Irish soldier described him so:

"His chest was narrow, his figure slender, his legs particularly thin. His skin was swarthy and rather coarse. His hands and feet were small .a woman might have envied them. His expression, when he was in good humor, was pleasant, but it became terrible when he was aroused. The change was unbelievable."

Bolivar explained his motives:

"I confess this (the coronation of Napoleon in 1804) made me think of my unhappy country and the glory which he would win who should liberate it"

And, later, after a victory against the Spaniards in 1819:

"The triumphal arches, the flowers, the hymns, the acclamations, the wreaths offered and placed upon my head by the hands of lovely maidens, the fiestas, the

thousand demonstrations of joy are the least of the gifts that I have received," he wrote. "The greatest and dearest to my heart are the tears, mingled with the rapture of happiness, in which I have been bathed and the embraces with which the multitude have all but crushed me."

Venezuela became independent in 1811 and Bolivar, being a minor - though self-aggrandizing - political figure, had little to do with it. After his first major military defeat, in defending the coastal town of Puerto Cabello against royalist insurgents out to oust the newly independent Venezuela, he advocated the creation of a professional army (in the Cartagena Manifesto). Far from being a revolutionary he, justly, opposed the reliance on guerrilleros and militiamen.

He then reconquered Caracas, Venezuela's capital, at the head of a small army and declared himself a dictator. He made Congress award him the title of El Libertador (the Liberator). The seeds of his personality cult were sown. When he lost Caracas to the royalists in yet another botched campaign, he retreated and captured Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia in December 1814.

After a series of uninterrupted military defeats, Bolivar exiled himself to Jamaica. In a sudden conversion, he published the Jamaica Letter (1815) in which he supported a model of government akin to the British parliamentary system - yet, only following a phase of "guided leadership" (identical to Hitler's "Führerprinzip").

But the self-anointed leader did not hesitate to desert his soldiers and leave them stranded after yet another of his military exploits - an attempt to capture Caracas - unravelled in 1816. He simply defected to Haiti, letting his loyal troops fend for themselves as best they could.

There followed a string of successful - even brilliant - battles and coalitions with local warlords and politicians which culminated in the liberation of Peru. In 1824, Bolivar was declared dictator - or, to be precise, "Emperor" - of Peru and commander in chief of its army. Bolivar liked power and its trappings. In the constitution he composed in 1826, he suggested that the president of Bolivia - the name given to the entire region, except Peru - should be appointed for life and should have the right to choose his successor.

This president - presumably, Bolivar - was described unabashedly by Bolivar himself as:

"The sun which, fixed in its orbit, imparts life to the universe. Upon him rests our entire order, notwithstanding his lack of powers. A life term president, with the power to choose his successor, is the most sublime

inspiration amongst republican regimes."

In a letter to Santander, the Liberator expounded:

"I am convinced, to the very marrow of my bones, that our America can only be ruled through a well-managed, shrewd despotism."

The National Geographic describes how:

"William Tudor, the American consul at Lima, wrote in 1826 of the 'deep hypocrisy' of Bolívar, who allowed himself to be deceived by the 'crawling, despicable flattery of those about him.' Later, John Quincy Adams would define Bolívar's military career as 'despotic and sanguinary' and state baldly that 'he cannot disguise his hankering after a crown.' In Bogotá the U. S. minister and future president, Gen. William Henry Harrison, accused Bolívar of planning to turn Gran Colombia into a monarchy: 'Under the mask of patriotism and attachment to liberty, he has really been preparing the means of investing himself with arbitrary power.' "

When, in 1828, a constitutional convention in Colombia rejected amendments to the constitution that he proposed, Bolivar assumed dictatorial powers in a coup d'etat.

Now, Bolivar was the oppressor. He has murdered, or exiled his political rivals throughout his career. He confiscated church funds and imposed onerous taxes on the populace. Consequently, the "Liberator" faced numerous uprisings and narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. By the time he died he was so despised that the government of Venezuela refused to allow his body onto its soil. It took 12 years of constant petitioning by the family to let his remains be interred in the country that he helped found.