



EL LIBERATOR.

“My religious and filial devotion to General Washington could not be better recognized by his family than by [their] honoring me with the commission they have entrusted to me [i.e. sending Bolivar a portrait of Washington along with a lock of the latter’s hair]...Of all men living, and even of all men in history, Bolivar is the very one to whom my paternal friend would have preferred to send this present. What else can I say to the great citizen whom South America has honored with the name of Liberator, confirmed in him by two worlds, a man endowed with an influence equal to his self-denial, who carries in his heart the sole love of freedom and of the republic?”

~ Lafayette in a letter to Bolivar, dated 13 Oct. 1825.

While Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) has been referred to as South America’s George Washington, he could also be reasonably likened to Napoleon, James Madison, Francis Marion, and Abraham Lincoln! And a student who prides himself on our own American Revolution without a working and rudimentary knowledge of Bolivar’s feats and achievements risks making himself look quite foolish.

In addition to being a remarkably (and usually) successful military leader and strategist, Bolivar was an extraordinary intellect and well read thinker, and if the only legacy he’d left behind were his writings (both those penned by himself and dictated to secretaries), he would still deserve to be internationally famous for these alone. If you haven’t read him before, be prepared to be impressed by the broad scope of erudition, his fervid passion for freedom and improving the lot of the South American peoples, his profound insight on government, and the high eloquence (indeed literary artistry) by means of which he expresses himself.

Here’s a sample of what I mean by way of an excerpt from his Address to the Congress of Angostura, Feb. 15, 1819:

“The people of America having been held under the triple yoke of ignorance, tyranny and vice, have not been in a position to acquire either knowledge, power or virtue. Disciples of such pernicious masters, the lessons we have received and the examples we have studied, are most destructive. We have been governed more by deception than by force, and we have been degraded more by vice than by superstition. Slavery is the offspring of Darkness; an ignorant people is a blind tool, turned to its own destruction; ambition and intrigue exploit the credulity and inexperience of men foreign to all political, economical or civil knowledge; mere illusions are accepted as reality, license is taken for liberty, treachery for patriotism, revenge for justice. Even as a sturdy blind man who, relying on the feeling of his own strength, walks along with the assurance of the most wideawake man and, striking against all kinds of obstacles, can not steady his steps.

“A perverted people, should it attain its liberty, is bound to lose this very soon, because it would be useless to try to impress upon such people that happiness lies in the practice of righteousness; that the reign of law is more powerful than the reign of tyrants, who are more inflexible, and all ought to submit to the wholesome severity of the law; that good morals, and not force, are the pillars of the law and that the exercise of justice is the exercise of liberty. Thus, Legislators, your task is the more laborious because you are to deal with men misled by the illusions of error, and by civil incentives. Liberty, says Rousseau, is a succulent food, but difficult to digest. Our feeble fellow-citizens will have to strengthen their mind much before they will be ready to assimilate such wholesome nourishment. Their limbs made numb by their fetters, their eyesight weakened in the darkness of their dungeons and their forces wasted away through their foul servitude, will they be capable of inarching with a firm step towards the august temple of Liberty? Will they be capable of coming close to it, and admiring the light it sheds, and of breathing freely its pure air?”

“Consider well your decision. Legislators. Do not forget that you are about to lay the foundations of a new people, which may some day rise to the heights that Nature has marked out for it, provided you make those foundations proportionate to the lofty place which that people is to fill. If your selection be not made under the guidance of the Guardian Angel of Venezuela, who must inspire you with wisdom to choose the nature and form of government that you choose to adopt for the welfare of the people; if you should fail in this, I warn you, the end of our venture would be slavery.

“The annals of past ages display before you thousands of governments. Recall to mind the nations which have shone most highly on the earth and you will be grieved to see that almost the entire world has been, and still is, a victim of bad government. You will find many systems of governing men, but all are calculated to oppress them, and if the habit of seeing the human race, led by shepherds of peoples, did not dull the horror of such a revolting sight, we would be astonished to see our social species grazing on the surface of the globe, even as lowly herds destined to feed their cruel drivers.

“Nature, in truth, endows us at birth with the instinctive desire for liberty; but whether because of negligence, or because of an inclination inherent in humanity, it remains still under the bonds imposed on it. And as we see it in such a state of debasement we seem to have reason to be persuaded that the majority of men hold as a truth the humiliating principle that it is harder to maintain the balance of liberty than to endure the weight of tyranny. Would to God that this principle, contrary to the morals of Nature, were false! Would to God that this principle were not sanctioned by the indolence of man as regards his most sacred rights!”

With respect to his military career, Bolivar knew defeat as well as victory, and the troops of his Royal Spanish opponents were often capable as fighting as well or better than his own men, and most of the time he was heavily, sometimes absurdly, outnumbered. How then did he achieve ultimate victory? By having a resolve, boldness, genius for leadership, a superior grasp of guerilla warfare, and a resilient steadfastness of purpose all of which his adversaries, generally, lacked. Moreover, he had lieutenants and allies, such as Paez, Sucre, and San Martin, no less lions in the field than himself.¹ It is interesting to note that in the latter part of the South American Wars for independence that he was assisted by British veterans of the Peninsula War, up to a reported 6,000, who served in his army as volunteers and mercenaries. Ironically, the same Spanish Bolivar combated as foes had fought alongside the U.S. versus the British during the American Revolution; while the Peninsula War veterans themselves had, under Wellington, been with Spain against the French. To perhaps confuse matters further, in 1806-07 the British, in a fairly large scale invasion of Argentina, had attempted, to wrest that country from Spain (which was then allied with Napoleonic France) only to be defeated by a intrepid and determined band of indigenous Argentines (without help from any Spanish troops) under Gen. Santiago de Liniers.

If, as is inevitably pointed out, Bolivar was by the end of his life disappointed in his political vision and goal for South America this may be much more attributed to the lofty, and perhaps impractical, grandeur of what he set out to do (and all at once no less) than any cravenness or shortcomings of the Latin American people of that time.

¹ Indeed, some experts praise San Martin as being a markedly superior general compared to Bolivar.

For a summary overview and sketch of Bolivar's military activity, see:
<http://www.militaryheritage.com/bolivar.htm>

While for a book length biography and that's available online, see:
<http://www.fullbooks.com/Simon-Bolivar-the-Liberator.html>

William Thomas Sherman

<http://www.gunjones.com> and http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

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