

How Bolivarian is the Bolivarian Revolution: Hugo Chávez and the Appropriation of History

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Abstract

Years of popular discontent with the Venezuelan government allowed Hugo Chávez to win the presidential election in 1998. Since then Venezuela has undergone dramatic changes and deviated sharply from the dominant two-party system that had previously governed the nation. Chávez's polemical new policies have affected virtually all aspects of Venezuelan life and are founded on his interpretations of the revered South American "Liberator," Simón Bolívar. By drawing upon the legacy of Bolívar, Chávez has been successful in exciting the masses and adding a sense of legitimacy to his "revolutionary" movement. This research will examine the correlation between these two historical figures by analyzing the histories and documents of both Chávez and Bolívar. The goals of which are to discover how closely the ideologies and actions of President Hugo Chávez coincide with those of his historical predecessor Simón Bolívar and to demonstrate how the Chávez government has appropriated the myth of Bolívar to gain legitimacy and maintain popular support in Venezuela.

Introduction

As the memories of the great victories for South American independence faded away, the reputation of the great "Liberator" Simón Bolívar followed suit. Bolívar had defeated Spain and triumphed over nature during an arduous mission for independence, but when his presence was no longer required on the battlefield there came a time "when people began to look ahead and think of a future without Bolívar."¹ Even Bolívar, weary of the pressures of ruling and a tumultuous career as a state builder, was keenly aware that, "the people want to know if I will ever cease to rule them."² These worries came to fruition in a cruel twist of fate in 1829 when Bolívar was exiled from the very countries he freed from Spanish oppression. This great disappointment coupled with prolonged fatigue, disease, and an overwhelming belief that he had "ploughed the sea" in service of his country led to his untimely death on December 17, 1830 at the age of forty-seven.

However, this final melancholy chapter of Bolívar's life is not how history has chosen to remember him. Twelve years after his premature death, Bolívar's ashes were returned to his hometown of Caracas amidst immense fanfare. During the ceremony, "Bolívar the man had begun to disappear behind Bolívar the myth."³ He was held up as a "model for the nation"⁴ a man whose strength "called forth valor, wisdom, and heroic defense... [Bolívar was] an immortal genius on a celestial mission."⁵ This veneration cemented Bolívar in the annals of history and did much to polish his faded reputation.

¹ John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 299.

² Simón Bolívar, *Address to the Congreso Admirable: Message to the Constituent Congress of the Republic of Colombia: in El Libertador: Writings of Simon Bolivar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 107.

³ John Chasteen, "Simón Bolívar: Man and Myth," in *Heroes & Hero Cults in Latin America*, ed Samuel Brunk & Ben Fallow (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 21.

⁴ Lynch, 301.

⁵ Chasteen, *Man and Myth*, 21-22.

Creating this myth was not a difficult task for the writers of history to accomplish. After all Bolívar did in fact lead an extraordinary life, and his exploits and background were exemplary. Bolívar was generously described as

A hero of pure Venezuelan lineage, who after a tragic marriage and a golden youth in Europe, assume[d] the leadership of national independence, provide[d] the intellectual base of a continental revolution, and then the military and political talents to create a union of states and win international respect, all the time asserting his manhood as a glorious lover.⁶

This impressive resume was a driving force behind the cult of Bolívar. The various ways for the common man and woman to relate to this hero were abundant, allowing for assimilation to take place rather simply.

Although where Bolívar's history becomes most difficult is in its application. Creating a political philosophy based on Bolivarian ideology is a complicated task, and has led to controversy and heated debate on the actual ideals of Bolívar. This ambiguity can be understood when one is aware of the notion that "the sheer accumulation of writings on Bolívar's life has served as much to obscure as to clarify his historical significance."⁷ Bolívar was an extremely diverse individual, thus deriving a *true* ideology is a demanding if not impossible endeavor.

Further obscuring Bolívar's principles was his practice of appropriating numerous governmental forms. The *Constitución de Bolivia*, or Plan of 1826 as it is sometimes referred, is considered by many to be the most prominent example of his mature work in state building. It was Bolívar's hope that this document could "become a model for other countries, including Gran Columbia (the combination of Venezuela, Panama, Columbia and Ecuador) to follow."⁸ However, this document is one of extremes: a hodgepodge of various political philosophies meshed together in an attempt to create "the guarantees of permanence and of liberty, of equality and order."⁹

From monarchy, [Bolívar] took the principle of stability; from democracy electoral power; from the unitary system, the absolute centralization of financial matters; from the federal system, the popular voice of nomination; from the oligarchic system, the life-time character of the censors; and from the system of the plebiscites, the right to petition and the referendum on constitutional amendments.¹⁰

This idealistic sampling of ideologies proved to be more than the people were ready for and was not received well by "leftist publicists" or its influential neighbor to the north: the United States.¹¹

By writing the Bolivian Constitution, Bolívar was attempting the miracle of "uniting the advantages of all systems, [but] what he did in reality was to unite all their defects: the absolutism of life tenure, the demagogic agitation of electoral assemblies, the drawbacks of both centralism and federation."¹² This tendency towards widespread ideological borrowing made Bolívar unique, but left his legacy open for interpretation and appropriation. Latin American leaders in search of legitimacy, whether they were dictators, democrats, or fell anywhere else in the political spectrum, have found a malleable idealistic foundation in the utilization of Bolívar.

The most recent of these leaders is the current president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez. Today in Venezuela Bolívar is ubiquitous. His name can be found on buses and signs; his image watching over the people in the form of paintings, murals, altars, and statues. A star has been added to the flag in his honor, even the country has been renamed the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. But what is the purpose of all this? Why is Bolívar so present and why now?

The answers to these questions lie in Hugo Chávez's awareness that the appropriation of Bolívar's historical myth promotes nationalism, fuels public support, and adds much needed legitimacy to his government. This clinging to the glorious past is not an original concept. In fact "Modern Latin American history is brimming

⁶ Lynch, 301.

⁷ German Carrera Damas, *El Culto de Bolívar* (Caracas: Universidad de Central Venezuela, 1973)

⁸ David Bushnell, "Simón Bolívar and the United States: A Study in Ambivalence," *Air University Review* July-August 1986, 2.

⁹ Víctor Andrés Belaunde, *Bolívar and the Political Thought of the Spanish American Revolution* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), 256.

¹⁰ Belaunde, 256.

¹¹ Bushnell, 1.

¹² Belaunde, 258.

with heroes. Since the independence movements of the early nineteenth century, the politics of the region have been profoundly personalistic.”¹³ For example, well-known leaders such as Getulio Vargas of Brazil and Juan Peron of Argentina both used their personalities, charisma, and military ties to gain power by appealing to, then controlling the working classes.

Chávez has followed this example set by his Latin American predecessors and latched on to this *personalismo* formula for power. This tactic has allowed him to employ his charisma and interpretations of history to shape himself after one of Venezuela’s most renowned figures, Simón Bolívar. However, aligning himself with the past has proven to be a controversial move for Chávez and has drawn both praise and scorn. “For his supporters, Chávez represents a break with the corrupt political traditions and infrastructures; for his critics, his Bolivarian self-fashioning signifies a return to the manias and disillusionments of the past.”¹⁴ Either way this issue is judged, Chávez’s adoption of Bolívar’s history and his implementation of the “Bolivarian Revolution” have done much to further his ambitions.

What follows is a comparison case study of Simón Bolívar and Hugo Chávez. Recent events stemming from Chávez’s unlikely election in 1998 have raised meaningful questions about his movement and his use of history. Why is studying the appropriation of history important? Who was Simón Bolívar? How has Chávez utilized Bolívar? How ‘Bolivarian’ is the Bolivarian Revolution? It is only through the examination of Bolívar and Chávez’s writings and statements that an accurate comparison of these two men can be formed. In this way it is the intention of this study to illustrate how Hugo Chávez has appropriated the historical record of Simon Bolivar to legitimize his political and social agendas.

Why History is Important

Before examining the particulars of this study between Hugo Chávez and Simón Bolívar, it is first essential to understand the importance of an accurate historical record. While it is impossible to separate all myth from history, it is vital to portray history as accurately as possible. “The traditional historian’s insistence that there is a difference between fact and fiction is rooted in the common sense conviction, fundamental to the conduct of life, that some things happened and some did not, that true statements are different from lies.”¹⁵ This insistence is important, but should not be absolute or static. Myth is a part of history, and vice-versa, however being able to distinguish those differences is crucial.

At the very least, the inaccurate representation of history and the glorification of national figures sanitizes history, making it bland and full of “lies by omission.”¹⁶ An example of this embellished history is George Washington’s chopping down a cherry tree. While this event never occurred the historical myth was used to idolize a key American figure erroneously portraying him as the epitome of honesty and morality.

This particular myth, in and of itself, is not particularly detrimental to society. However, at the other end of the spectrum, some of the world’s greatest atrocities and human rights violations have occurred by inventing history and using it as a propaganda tool. Perhaps the most glaring example of this would be Adolf Hitler using “Germany’s humiliation at Versailles and the dismal German economy to re-channel rage against internal Jewry.”¹⁷

While it is highly unlikely that President Hugo Chávez has anything sinister planned it is important for people to realize when they are being taught versions of the past that are inaccurate. The old adage that “those who do not know history are at the mercy of those who do” rings true in every generation.

Simon Bolivar: A Brief History

So much has been written on the life and career of Simón Bolívar that to produce truly unique or original data would require an exhaustive search and is beyond the scope of this project. What follows in this section is meant as a brief synopsis to help the reader better understand the life of the man that liberated six countries from Spanish rule.

¹³ Chasteen, 1.

¹⁴ Christopher B. Conway, *The Cult Of Bolívar in Latin American Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 159.

¹⁵ Peter Heehs, “Myth, History, and Theory,” *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 16.

¹⁶ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 5.

¹⁷ Ben Agger, “Beyond Beltway and Bible Belt: Re-imagining the Democratic Party and the American Left, www.fastcapitalism.com

Simón Bolívar was born into one of the most affluent Creole families in Venezuela on July 24, 1783. Yet, his childhood was both “privileged and deprived.”¹⁸ By the age of nine Bolívar had lost both of his parents to tuberculosis. However, their passing, in addition to the large inheritance bequeathed to him by his wealthy cousin Juan Félix Jerez Aristeguieta y Bolívar, made Simón Bolívar an extremely wealthy man, freeing him from the worries and trappings of most in Venezuelan society.

Bolívar, not content with his life in Venezuela, set off for Europe at the age of fifteen. At this point in his life he possessed only a limited education from tutors Andrés Bello and Simon Rodríguez and a short stint as “a cadet in the elite militia corps” which he passed with a “good report.”¹⁹ However, this lack of formal education would prove to be no hindrance for what lay ahead; rather his unique childhood awarded him “a strong will and power of decision” as well as the ability to “socialize easily with lower-class people.”²⁰ Also, it was during this time that he began to “show an early trace of *noblesse oblige* that became a hallmark of his character.”²¹

The time spent in Europe presented a new world to Bolívar, and was divided into two distinct segments. The first was spent primarily in Spain. There Bolívar was tutored by the marquis of Uztáriz. “Uztáriz was the first stable influence in Bolívar’s life” and under his guidance Bolívar studied “philosophy, history, mathematics, and languages, and in his circle he was able to develop his social skills, to listen and to learn.”²² It was also during this period when he met Maria Teresa Rodríguez del Toro y Alayza. The two fell madly in love and returned to Venezuela as husband and wife. However, tragedy struck soon after the couple arrived; Maria fell ill and died in 1803.

Stricken with grief Bolívar returned to Europe in 1804, although this time to France. There Bolívar experienced a “political and intellectual awakening.” Immersing himself in enlightenment thought, he read extensively, attended high-society affairs, and made his immortal vow in Rome that he would “not rest body or soul until he had broken the chains binding us to the will of Spanish might.”²³ These experiences transformed him, and when Bolívar returned to Caracas in 1807 he was an intensely driven man imbued with a passion for liberty and the desire to free his country from Spanish rule.

Gaining popular support for an uprising against the Spanish crown was no simple undertaking, but Bolívar held true to his Roman oath. His first effort to take Caracas was mildly successful but led to an embarrassing defeat to a counter-revolutionary force in 1812. However, Bolívar regrouped and was able to retake Caracas. This military incursion put an end to the First Republic of Venezuela and established Bolívar as a “military dictator” in charge of the Second Republic.²⁴ Unfortunately for Bolívar, this victory was short lived, and he soon found himself on the run.

Taking refuge in Haiti, Bolívar tried again to retake Caracas in 1816. His effort was a failure and forced him to reconsider his strategy. Bolívar decided it best to take Bogotá instead. The campaign required great risk, but succeeded due in large part by catching the Spanish troops completely unaware. From there Bolívar gained momentum, and he and his generals proceeded to take territory after territory. Each success building on the previous and the Spanish strongholds of Caracas, Quito, Bolivia and Lima all fell into patriot hands ousting Spain from Latin America.

These legendary victories made Bolívar immensely popular and thrust him into the political sphere. Unfortunately, he was unable to translate his success on the battlefield into that of state building. The most well-known example of this was his Bolivian Constitution. Bolívar created “an authoritarian document that instituted a president for life with almost monarchial powers and gave no significant role at all to popular elections.”²⁵ To Bolívar this project was “the product of his mature political thinking, indeed his masterpiece.”²⁶ However, this was not the sentiment of his opposition. The constitution became extremely unpopular and significantly advanced his

¹⁸ Lynch, 7.

¹⁹ Lynch, 18.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 19.

²³ Simón Bolívar, *Oath Taken in Rome: in El Libertador: Writings of Simon Bolivar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 114.

²⁴ Chasteen, 14.

²⁵ Chasteen, 27.

²⁶ David Bushnell, *El Libertador: Writings of Simon Bolivar*, ed. David Bushnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxxv.

downfall. With his power dwindling and his opponents gaining in strength, Bolivar was forced into exile and died in 1830.

The life of Simón Bolívar is a fascinating and intricate study not only for his accomplishments and failures but also because his life seems to be a contradiction in terms. “Bolívar was an exceptionally complex man, a liberator who scorned liberalism, a soldier who disparaged militarism, a republican who admired monarchy. To study Bolívar is to study a rare and original character.”²⁷ These contradictions leave the historian, or anyone for that matter, the flexibility of interpretation. This flexibility is the underlying foundation to why his name has been evoked so often by so many.

How Chávez Appropriated Bolívar

Hugo Chávez’s admiration of Simón Bolívar began much earlier than the Bolivarian Revolution currently underway in Venezuela. According to Chávez, as noted by Chávez biographers Cristina Marcano & Alberto Barrera Tyszka, his education about the Liberator began during his childhood. “Instead of Superman, my hero was Bolívar,” Chávez recalls, “in my village, my grandfather would say to me: look there’s Bolívar’s mountain. And I would imagine Bolívar crossing the Andes.”²⁸ These idealized images of his hero introduced Chávez, at an early age, to the cult of Bolívar, and thus he has “developed a penchant for novelizing his [Bolívar’s] life.”²⁹

As time passed Chávez continued to foster his appreciation for his hero eventually becoming a scholar of Bolívar’s life and philosophies. Chávez used this knowledge in perhaps his earliest significant application of the myth of Bolívar on December 17, 1982. “He and two fellow officers inaugurate[d] their secret political cell, the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario -200*, by restaging Bolívar’s Roman oath.”³⁰ The oath was not verbatim to that of Bolívar’s enduring words, but they evoked Bolívar’s spirit nonetheless. “I swear in the name of the God of my parents; I swear on my homeland that I won’t give peace to my soul until I have seen broken the chains that oppress my people, by the order of the powerful. Popular election, free men and lands, horror to the oligarchy.”³¹ It was at this moment Chávez made the conscious decision to fashion himself and his revolutionary movement after Simón Bolívar. This controversial choice has proved both monumental for Venezuela and advantageous for Chávez.

In each endeavor that Chávez undertakes, he calls upon Bolívar. When the MBR – 200’s coup d’état failed in February of 1992, Chávez addressed the nation. In his now famous statement he thanked his comrades for their loyalty, courage and selfless generosity then asked them to lay down their arms. Chávez realized that their coup had failed, and he sent his “Bolivarian message” accepting full responsibility for his “Bolivarian military uprising.”³² The fact that Chávez was willing to shoulder the responsibility for his failed coup attempt brought him instant recognition and respect. In a country where recent years had brought the citizens of Venezuela “political and economic failures, the devaluation of the currency, bank collapses, trials for corruption and economic decline no one in a position of power had ever said sorry, or accepted any portion of blame.”³³ Chávez and his Bolivarian ideals stood alone.

In fact just a month following his coup, Chávez was interviewed in the popular Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional*. In this interview he is quoted that “the true creator of this liberation, the real leader of this rebellion, was General Simón Bolívar. With his incendiary verb, he has illuminated the path for us.”³⁴

The truth is, since he began his time in the spot light Chávez has rarely missed an opportunity to reference Bolívar. Whether it is to an international audience at the United Nations, a public rally in the streets of Caracas, or every Sunday on his television variety show *Aló Presidente*, Chavez ever so carefully and charismatically draws direct correlations between himself and Bolivar.

What is important to realize about this strategy is that when Chávez utilizes Bolívar in his rhetoric he is able to tie his cause to Bolívar’s. In doing this Chávez adds a significant voice from the past that evokes the spirit of a national icon without that same speaker being able to disagree. This inventive use of historical figures allows

²⁷ Lynch, xi.

²⁸ Christina Marcano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka, *Hugo Chavez*, trans. Kristina Cordero (New York: Random House, 2004), 93.

²⁹ Marcano & Tyszka, 93.

³⁰ Conway, 152.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Richard Gott, *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2005), 67.

³³ Gott, 68.

³⁴ Marcano & Tyszka, 92.

Chávez to build unique relationships and identities with those he attaches himself to. Additionally, this ingenious style creates a model that draws the parallel that; to champion the ideals of Bolívar is the same as supporting the policies of Chávez.

How Bolivarian is the Bolivarian Revolution?

When Hugo Chávez set out in 1999 to create a lasting revolutionary constitution for Venezuela, he undertook an extremely challenging mission. During the 137 years between Independence from Spain in 1821 until the Venezuelan Constitution written in 1958 “more than 20 constitutions were drafted, promulgated and ignored.”³⁵ In order to quell some of this instability, Chávez chose to base his Constitution on his hero, Simón Bolívar. Article one of Venezuela’s 1999 Constitution states that:

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is irrevocably free and independent, basing its moral property and values of freedom, equality, justice, and international peace on the doctrine of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator. Independence, liberty, sovereignty, immunity, territorial integrity and national self-determination are unrenounceable rights of the Nation.³⁶

However, even with this ideology so plainly stated in the opening of the Constitution, how closely does Chávez follow his hero’s precedent?

In order to shed light on this question, this section focuses predominantly on comparing the 1826 Constitución de Bolivia written by Bolívar to that of the Hugo Chávez’s 1999 Constitution. However, additional works such as speeches, interviews, and other minor and major political statements are analyzed. These selected works have been chosen to show both the discrepancies and similarities between these two men. Also this comparison is between what is written in these documents, not what is or was actually carried out. Often there can be a great difference between intention and reality. Perhaps the most fundamental ideological contradiction between the stated principles of the two men can be seen in the differing emphasis placed on the role and involvement of the average citizen. Bolívar was a dictator for a large portion of his career and was adamantly opposed to open elections for the head of state. His preferred method of succession for the presidency was to carefully select a worthy and ethical vice-president. Then this appointee would follow as the next president at the retirement of his predecessor. In Bolívar’s opinion “This provision avoided elections, which produce the scourge of republics, anarchy.”³⁷ This line of thinking demonstrates a lack of confidence in both the “rustic inhabitants of the countryside [and] the intriguers living in the city.” Bolívar’s reasoning behind this belief was “because the former are so ignorant that they vote mechanically while the latter are so ambitious that they turn everything into factions.”³⁸

Yet it is important to note that to Bolívar “dictatorship was not a long term solution.”³⁹ He strongly believed that “If a single man were necessary to sustain a state, that state should not exist, and in the end would not.”⁴⁰ He also staunchly defended his constitution as a “liberal document,” and it is stated in Articles 6 and 7 that “The government of Bolivia is a representative democracy” and that “Sovereignty emanates from the people.”⁴¹ In part this is true, although the Bolivian Constitution is not a representative democracy as contemporary society has come to view this term. Bolívar “favored a restricted right to vote...and an obvious preference to govern always with the aid of extraordinary powers.”⁴² His justification for this discrimination was that “everyone is born with

³⁵ Max Manwaring, “Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, Bolivarian Socialism, and Asymmetric Warfare,” www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil, 2005

³⁶ 1999 Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, title 1, art. 1.

³⁷ Simón Bolívar, *Address to the Constituent Congress: in El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 54.

³⁸ Simón Bolívar, *Cartagena Manifesto: in El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 3.

³⁹ Bushnell, *Writings of Simón Bolívar*, xliii.

⁴⁰ Simón Bolívar, *Address to the Congreso Admirable: in El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 107.

⁴¹ Simón Bolívar, *1826 Constitución de Bolivia: in El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 64.

⁴² Writings, xliii.

equal rights but not equal ability.”⁴³ However, Bolívar did hold himself to strong ethical standards and hoped that when the people became properly educated his services in government would no longer be needed.

For Chávez this method of popular exclusion would be tantamount to political suicide. Primarily because Chávez comes from poverty; he is one of Bolívar’s so called “rustic inhabitants.” He grew up living in a home with a dirt floor and knows intimately the hardships of poverty. This personal history has created a deep connection and emotional attachment with the poor. Moreover, when the poor in Venezuela, “which is three-quarters of the population,” look at Chávez they see themselves not an “out of touch politician.”⁴⁴ Chávez frequently adds fuel to these feelings of political and social inequality by making inflammatory accusations about the opposition:

You Venezuelans are not to blame; you know who is to blame for what has happened to us; I am going to get rid of these people around us, don’t doubt it; and, what’s more, I will solve all your problems.⁴⁵

Chávez’s “fierce indictment of the old political order—and his promise of a *revolution* in honor of South America’s Liberator, Simón Bolívar [holds] wide appeal among poor Venezuelans.”⁴⁶ Chávez has taken a disenfranchised populace left out of sharing its nation’s wealth and given them hope for a brighter, more just future. Chávez embraces this popular support and has guaranteed Venezuelan citizens universal suffrage under articles 63 and 64 in his 1999 constitution.

Additionally, Article 6 of the Venezuelan Constitution states that “The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela... is and always will be democratic, participatory, elective, decentralized, alternative, responsible, pluralist, with revocable mandates.”⁴⁷ Comparing these two ideologies of Bolívar and Chávez it is apparent that Chávez takes a more populist stance than does Bolívar. Bolívar would deem it irresponsible and unwise to place the fate of his nation and his government entirely in the hands of the people.

While Chávez’s touting of Bolívar’s positive stance towards democratic values can be seen to be flawed, there are numerous other aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution that are Bolivarian in spirit. These positions include equality, freedom of religion, and a deep distrust of the United States. While these principles are not identical in nature they have concurrent threads running through them. The issues of oppression are just as alive now as they were then, thus the application of these rights must change somewhat as time passes.

To begin, equality is addressed in substantial depth in both the 1826 Bolivian Constitution and the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution. For Bolívar, equality is “the law of all laws” and without it “all guarantees, all rights perish.”⁴⁸ This idea was not a universally popular principle then, and it pertained primarily to slave labor. However, Bolívar remained strong in his stance against slavery and wrote eloquently for its cessation. “Can there be slavery where equality reigns? Such a contradiction would demean not so much our sense of justice as our sense of reason; our notoriety would be based on insanity, not usurpation.”⁴⁹ Throughout his fight for equality Bolívar held true to his principles, although he was forced to make concessions to the landed elite in order to achieve his final objective of slave emancipation.

Chávez addresses the issue of equality in Article 21 of the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution: All persons are equal before the law... No discrimination based on race, sex, creed or social standing shall be permitted, nor, in general any discrimination with the intent or effect of nullifying or encroaching upon the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on equal terms, of the rights and liberties of every individual.⁵⁰

This definition of equality goes beyond what Bolívar had in mind for equal rights, but it makes sense because of the differing political environments. When Bolívar was in power the institution of slavery was waning, and to move from emancipation to complete equal rights would be a challenge for any society to undertake no matter how enlightened.

⁴³ Cameron & Major, 264.

⁴⁴ Micheal Shifter, "In Search of Hugo Chávez," *Foreign Affairs* May/June (2002): 2.

⁴⁵ Cameron & Major, 260.

⁴⁶ Shifter, 2.

⁴⁷ 1999 Constitución de Venezuela, title 1, art. 6.

⁴⁸ Simon Bolivar, *Address to the Constituent Congress*, 61.

⁴⁹ Bolivar, *Address to the Constituent Congress*, 62.

⁵⁰ 1999 Constitución de Venezuela, title 3, art. 21.

Like Bolívar, Chávez is also adamantly opposed to slavery and has stated in Article 54, “No person shall be subjected to slavery or servitude. Traffic of persons, in particular women, children and adolescents, in any form, shall be subject to the penalties prescribed by law.”⁵¹ This ideology is particularly in line with Bolivarian thought and demonstrates a desire for the cessation of oppression.

Another aspect of Chávez’s new constitution that corresponds with Bolívar’s is the freedom of religion. Bolívar wrote that:

In a political system there should be no preference for one religion over another...Religion is a law of conscience. Any law imposed on it annuls it, because when we enforce duty, we remove merit from faith, which is the basis of religion.⁵²

Bolívar argued this stance using the idea that the rules of man were separate from the laws of Heaven; each set having its own purpose and its own methods of enforcement. Bolívar felt that “to mix our laws with the commandments of the Lord... would be sacrilegious and profane.”⁵³ It is debatable how personally religious Bolívar was, but it is clear that he felt that freedom of religion was a necessity for the progressive operation of both church and government.

Chávez again follows suit on this issue: “The State guarantees the freedom of cult and religion. All persons have the right to profess their religious faiths and cults, and express their beliefs in private or in public.”⁵⁴ Chávez, like Bolívar, feels that the two institutions of government and religion must be separate, and that free expression of one’s personal beliefs is an axiomatic right.

Another interesting aspect of their aligning political thought, and one that may illuminate Chávez’s behavior, is a profound sense of uneasiness towards the United States. Regarding this particular topic it is probably accurate to aver that Bolívar would be a supporter of Chávez. Bolívar truly admired the US and its methods of “rational democracy,” and he was admired in kind.⁵⁵ However, his underlying feelings towards the United States were a mix of “admiration” and of “mistrust.”⁵⁶ This latent anxiety worsened when Bolívar penned his 1826 Constitution. Soon after the drafting of this document he came under harsh criticism from the US for abandoning republican ideals. Even some of his ardent supporters such as the US consul in Lima, “changed abruptly from an admirer of Bolívar to almost a pathological detractor, referring to him in his dispatches as a hypocritical usurper and madman.”⁵⁷ These heated remarks, in addition to diplomatic and military altercations, bolstered the animosity between Bolívar and the US.

This continued deterioration led to Bolívar writing perhaps his most famous quote castigating his northern neighbor: “The United States... seems destined by Providence to plague America with miseries in the name of Freedom.”⁵⁸ However unfavorable this quote portrays the United States it is important to understand the context under which it was written. According to noted Latin American scholar David Bushnell, Bolívar wrote these words “against a backdrop of a protectorate scheme” with Great Britain, and “related monarchist intrigues.”⁵⁹ Bolívar did not despise the United States, he simply was wary of such a powerful and ambitious nation in such relative close proximity.

This caution strengthened Bolívar’s desire to exclude the US from his Congress of Panama. In his mind this meeting would form an alliance of countries that were freed from Spanish rule that could work together for the common good and defend themselves from mutual enemies. This belief made him a “forerunner of Pan-Latin Americanism” and it is cited by Bushnell that today Bolívar would “presumably be a warm supporter of all common-market projects and possibly even common fronts against the International Monetary Fund.”⁶⁰ These two issues are essential elements for societal change supported by Hugo Chávez.

⁵¹ 1999 Constitución de Venezuela, sec. 2, art. 54.

⁵² Bolívar, *Address to the Constituent Congress*, 62

⁵³ Bolívar, *Address to the Constituent Congress*, 62

⁵⁴ 1999 Constitución de Venezuela, sec. 2, art. 59.

⁵⁵ Bushnell, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Simon Bolívar, *Letter to Colonel Patrick Campbell: in El Libertador: Writings of Simon Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell, trans. Frederick H. Fornoff (Oxford: University Press 2003), 173

⁵⁹ Bushnell, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Chávez has taken this philosophy further and expanded on Bolívar's precautionary economic concept of Pan-Latin Americanism with his own economic plan, the Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (ALBA). At its heart, ALBA is a counterbalance to US-backed free trade agreements that rejects neo-liberalism and "promotes trade and investment in member governments, based on cooperation, and with the aim of improving people's lives, not making profits."⁶¹ The aim of this socially conscious policy is to move away from the uni-polar control of the United States to a multi-polar society where power is more equally distributed. This shift is aimed at creating a more just society not only in Venezuela but in all countries that are disenfranchised and suffer due to their poor global standing.

Conclusion

For Chávez to accurately embody all the qualities and ideals of Simón Bolívar would require a degree of political and social schizophrenia. The revolutionary circumstances surrounding Bolívar's career required him to become an adept and flexible politician. One day he would need to make concessions to the oligarchy or caudillos, and the next he would fight for slave rights. He worked to give those without power a voice, but not too much as to upset the social order. Bolívar was forced to walk a political tightrope. Many times he had to choose between the lesser of two evils and pursue the path that he felt ensured the health and stability of the countries that he fought to liberate. This task is especially daunting when the economic, political, and social differences between each country and its citizenry are taken into consideration. This constant state of unrest and uncertainty transformed Bolívar's ideologies into a contradiction in terms.

The addresses and decrees, public and private correspondence, and other writings of Bolívar seem much like the Bible or the works of Shakespeare: a diligent searcher can find something in them on almost any subject imaginable and can often find Bolívar at one time or another seeming to support every side of every argument.⁶²

This fact about Simón Bolívar has made his ideologies readily available for appropriation and application into the public realm.

Chávez has capitalized on this adaptability of the cult of Bolívar. His diligent studies of the great Liberator as well as his resourceful methods of tying Bolívar's struggle to the problems of the poor contemporary Venezuelan citizens have been significant factors in his impressive rise to power. By adopting Bolivarian ideology, Chávez has distinguished himself from the corrupt two-party system that preceded him. This shift has also given a sense of empowerment to those who were previously oppressed. While many statistics and studies disregard Chávez's reforms as mere handouts, the real affect and source of much of Chávez's popularity lays in the fact that many of the poor citizens in Venezuela feel that finally someone in power sincerely cares about their plight.

Chávez has fostered this sentiment with carefully selected Bolivarian quotes and symbols. These quotes and symbols have then been relayed or displayed to the people at opportune moments and have done much to strengthen Chávez as the apotheosis of leadership. However, this selective use of history, memorable quotations, and symbolism is oversimplified history. It is true that Bolívar was an influential leader and undoubtedly one of Latin America's greatest heroes of the Spanish-American Revolution, but that was not all he was. Bolívar, like any man or woman in history, is full of flaws, missteps, contradictions and questionable decisions. It is only through the study of the entire man that the Venezuelan people can grasp what Simón Bolívar stood for.

The real irony is that Chávez has thrilled the masses with speeches about Bolívar's love of liberty, when liberty to Bolívar did not mean democracy or socialism. This romanticized interpretation of Bolívar has been partly responsible for Chávez's ability to use democracy to make Venezuela less democratic. This may seem confusing, but Chávez is creating what many "classical liberal thinkers feared most... a quasi-tyranny of the majority. The Chávez regime has emerged as an example of how leaders can exploit state resources and the public's widespread desire for change to crowd out the opposition, and, by extension, democracy."⁶³ Just a brief examination of Chávez's referendums illuminates this claim; increased executive power, centralization of the government,

⁶¹ Shawn Hattingh, "ALBA: Creating a Regional Alternative to Neo-Liberalism?" <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/3154>

⁶² Bushnell, 1.

⁶³ Javier Corrales & Michael Penfold, "Venezuela Crowding Out the Opposition." *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2007): 100.

lengthened presidential terms, and no cap on presidential re-elections. In regards to this ever-expanding web of power that Chávez is creating, he may be more akin to the actual Bolívar than in any other aspect. However, this is not the version of Bolívar that Chávez touts in his speeches to inspire those to take up his cause.

For the moment, it seems that Bolívar's memory is intricately tied to the fate of Chávez. Soon after Chávez was elected President in 1999, Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez remarked after an interview with Chávez that he "was overwhelmed by the feeling that he had just been chatting pleasantly with two opposing men...One to whom the caprices of fate had given an opportunity to save his country. The other, an illusionist, who could pass into the history books as just another despot."⁶⁴ Whichever road history chooses for the Chávez regime it appears that Simón Bolívar's legacy will be there for every step of the journey.

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⁶⁴ Shifter, 1.