

# Bill of Rights in Action

## SIMON BOLIVAR: THINKER, LIBERATOR, REFORMER

SIMON BOLIVAR IS BEST KNOWN AS THE LIBERATOR OF MOST OF SPANISH SOUTH AMERICA. HE WAS ALSO A REVOLUTIONARY THINKER WHO TRIED TO ADAPT DEMOCRATIC IDEAS AND SOCIAL REFORMS TO NATIONS HE LIBERATED.

Simon Bolivar was born in 1783 in Caracas, Venezuela, then a Spanish colony. Venezuela had originally been part of New Granada. (The modern nations at the north of South America — Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama — made up New Granada.)

Venezuela's ruling class came from those born in Spain and from creoles, who were born in the New World to Spanish parents. Important positions in the colonial government, however, were reserved for the Spanish-born, and creoles resented being barred from holding them. The remainder of Venezuela's



SIMON BOLIVAR (1783-1830) led the successful effort to make South America independent from Spain.

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population consisted of free blacks, African slaves, Indians, and mixed-race groups.

Bolivar was born into a wealthy creole family. Both of his parents died before he was 10, and he inherited estates, plantations, and about 150 slaves. An uncle became his guardian and took care of his inheritance.

Young Bolivar learned little from a series of tutors. His uncle complained about his roaming the streets of Caracas with lower-class youth. For a short time, he was enrolled in a militia where he received his only formal military training.

At 16, Bolivar went off to Spain for further schooling, but he never

attended a university. At age 18, he fell deeply in love and married the daughter of a Spanish aristocrat. Bolivar took his bride to Venezuela, but she died of yellow fever within a few months. He vowed never to marry again. Bolivar later said that the death of his wife sent him on a totally different path in life, one that made him a revolutionary.

### Becoming a Revolutionary

In 1803, Bolivar left Venezuela for Paris. France had undergone a revolution, experienced years of revolutionary rule, and a new leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, had taken charge of the nation.

Bolivar began studying about government and how countries should be ruled. He read books by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu, who had differing opinions on government. He also studied the revolutionary ideas of the American Thomas Paine. One lesson he learned was that each nation's laws should fit that nation's character. Bolivar vowed

### A NEW ORDER

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* looks at people who set up a "new order," for better or worse. The first article explores the life of the Liberator, Simon Bolivar, who fought for South America's independence from Spain. The second article examines J.P. Morgan, the Panic of 1907, and the creation of the Federal Reserve. The last article looks at Juan Peron, the president of Argentina whose Peronism still influences that country.

**World History: Simon Bolivar: Thinker, Liberator, Reformer**

**U.S. History: J.P. Morgan, the Panic of 1907, and the Federal Reserve Act**

**Government: Juan Peron: Dictator or Champion of Social Justice?**

### WORLD HISTORY

to break the chains of Spanish rule in his homeland.

In 1807, Bolivar returned home. The following year, Venezuela learned that Napoleon had invaded Spain and sent King Ferdinand VII into exile. Resistance forces in Spain established their own government, called the Central Junta. Caracas creoles also proclaimed a junta to govern Venezuela in the name of the king until he was restored to the throne. The junta idea spread throughout Spanish South America.

Bolivar and others demanded full independence from Spain. On July 5, 1811, the Caracas Junta declared independence for Venezuela, the first such declaration anywhere in Spanish South America.

The revolutionaries established a republic. From the U.S. Constitution, they adopted the idea of federalism, which divides power between the central government and states. In Venezuela, this meant a weak central government with three presidents, while the provinces and cities held most of the power.

Not all creoles supported an independent republic. They wanted Spanish rule to come back once King Ferdinand VII returned to the throne. Called royalists, these creole supporters of the monarchy began to provoke uprisings against the republic.

In 1812, Spanish troops landed to crush the republic. The republicans fielded an army, which Bolivar joined, but the soldiers were poorly trained and led. Spanish and royalist troops entered Caracas with little resistance. Supporters of the republic fled, Bolivar among them. The First Republic, as it was later called, collapsed.

## Revolutionary Thinker

Bolivar escaped westward to Cartagena, the main seaport of New Granada. In December 1812, he wrote the Cartagena Manifesto, which stated the reasons he thought Venezuela's republic had failed.

Bolivar wrote that the biggest mistake was to adopt U.S. federalism. In

practice, he explained, this allowed each province and city to rule itself and ignore national needs, including defense against the Spanish and royalists.

Bolivar also opposed the republic's elections. He wrote that in the countryside, the vast majority of people were illiterate and ignorant of politics. In Caracas, he argued, elections only divided people into warring factions.

Bolivar wrote that Venezuela should have a strong unifying central government. "Our division, not the Spanish forces," he declared, is what defeated the republic.

With hardly any military background, Bolivar recruited an army and led it back into Venezuela. When he defeated the Spanish in one battle after another, his reputation grew, and more men joined him.

The Spanish committed atrocities on civilians to stop them from aiding Bolivar. This caused Bolivar to declare "a war to the death," which meant any Spanish prisoner who refused to join the fight for independence was executed.

On August 6, 1813, Bolivar entered Caracas. An assembly established the Second Republic. It granted Bolivar "supreme power" to prevent the division that undermined the First Republic. The following year, however, Spanish troops and royalists drove Bolivar and the republicans out of Caracas a second time. Bolivar went into exile on the British island colony of Jamaica.

Meanwhile in Europe, Napoleon was defeated in Spain, and King Ferdinand VII returned to the throne. He sent a huge Spanish military expedition to America to crush the independence movement. This "pacifying" army reconquered New Granada by October 1816 and executed thousands of republicans in mass hangings.

In Jamaica, Bolivar again put his thoughts on paper. In the Jamaica Letter, Bolivar accused Spain of crippling the political development of South Americans by depriving them of any

experience with self-government.

Bolivar argued that U.S.-style democracy was impractical until South Americans could "acquire the political skills and virtues that distinguished our brothers to the north." He also declared that British- or Spanish-style monarchy was wrong for South America. He thought there should be a middle way of governing.

In December 1815, Bolivar sailed to Haiti to organize another attempt to liberate Venezuela. Haitian slaves had revolted against the French-ruled colony in 1804 and established the first republic in all of Latin America.

In Haiti, Bolivar recruited an invasion force of creole exiles and Europeans. He also got arms, supplies, and naval transport from the Haitian president but on the condition that Bolivar would abolish slavery in Venezuela.

After Bolivar landed in Venezuela in 1816, he decreed freedom for those slaves who joined his liberation army. Few accepted this condition.

After suffering initial defeat, Bolivar set up a base far up the Orinoco River in the interior of Venezuela. He actively recruited slaves and those of mixed race who made up more than half of Venezuela's population. He promised them land confiscated from Spanish and royalist owners.

Bolivar spoke of his vision for Venezuela. He emphasized that the only way to unify Venezuela's diverse people was legal equality for all. "Unity, unity, unity — that must be our motto," he cried. Unity had to include "absolute freedom for the slaves." A nation "cannot be simultaneously free and enslaved."

He argued for a single powerful president, elected by the people or their representatives. A weak executive, he warned, led to anarchy and then tyranny. Finally, he called for the union of Venezuela and New Granada into one strong nation. He foresaw this union as a new order, "revealing to the old world the majesty of the modern world."



A MAP OF THE MODERN COUNTRIES of South America. All were Spanish colonies except Brazil (Portuguese), Guyana (British), Suriname (Dutch), and Guiana (still a French possession).

## The Liberator

Over the next few years, Bolivar mounted successful military campaigns against the Spanish in Venezuela and New Granada. He surprised the Spanish and their royalist allies by his quick movements and unexpected tactics. Bolivar captured Caracas in June 1821, permanently ending Spanish rule there. Bolivar assembled a constitutional convention that voted to unify Venezuela and New Granada into the Republic of Colombia with its capital at Bogota.

Colombia's Congress unanimously elected Bolivar as the new nation's first president for a four-year

term. Bolivar accepted, but only if he could continue the fight to liberate all of Spanish South America.

As president, Bolivar pressed for the immediate freedom of all slaves. He divided community lands among the Indians, established schools for their children, and required wages for their work. But creole landowners in Congress opposed most of these reforms.

Bolivar was soon on the move to liberate the remaining Spanish colonies. His top general, Antonio Jose de Sucre, defeated the Spanish in Ecuador. Bolivar joined him there in June 1822 and annexed it to Colombia.

Jose de San Martin was the other great liberator of Spanish South America. He was a creole professional army officer from Argentina and part of the independence movement there. He led an army over the Andes to liberate Chile. From Chile, San Martin invaded and liberated coastal Peru.

In July 1822, San Martin and Bolivar met secretly in Ecuador, and San Martin apparently agreed to hand over Peru to Bolivar and return home to Argentina. Bolivar moved to Peru, and the republican Congress made him dictator. To the dismay of many Peruvian creoles, Bolivar decreed that land be distributed and schools set up for the Indians, who made up a large majority of the population.

The last Spanish army in South America occupied a large area called Upper Peru. On April 1, 1825, Gen. Sucre defeated the Spanish in the last battle of the liberation wars, ending 300 years of Spanish colonial rule in South America.

Several months after Sucre's victory, an assembly of creole representatives declared Upper Peru's independence and named their new nation Bolivia in honor of the man whom all patriots in South America now called the Liberator.

## The Bolivian Constitution

The Bolivian assembly asked Bolivar to write its constitution. The Bolivian Constitution reflected Bolivar's attempt to design a government suitable for South American nations.

The Liberator proposed his constitution to the Bolivian Constitutional Congress in May 1826. He called for Bolivia to adopt a representative democracy with the people holding ultimate political power. But voters would have to be able read and write even though two-thirds of the people were illiterate Indians.

Bolivar wanted a three-house legislature that would divide the responsibility of lawmaking. The judiciary's job was to safeguard freedom, equality, and security.

The most controversial part of the constitution was Bolivar's idea ▶

for the president to hold a life term with the power to choose his successor. The president's authority was limited by the constitution, but he commanded the military, and the legislature could vote him absolute power "in time of war or extreme danger."

For a society where government and the Roman Catholic Church had always been joined together, Bolivar surprisingly recommended religious freedom and the separation of church and state. The state, he said, "cannot govern the conscience of its subjects."

Finally, Bolivar added a bill of rights. This included guarantees for civil liberties, property, press freedom, and privacy in the home. The constitution also abolished slavery and banned the use of torture.

The Bolivian Constitutional Congress adopted most of what Bolivar proposed. But it delayed freeing the slaves and made Catholicism the official religion. The Congress elected Gen. Sucre president for life, but he really did not want this position and resigned after two years.

Bolivar hoped the Bolivian Constitution would become the model for all the nations liberated from Spain. He also proposed a confederation of American republics to promote cooperation among them. He wanted Britain to provide overall protection since he distrusted the growing power of the U.S. Despite a meeting of some republics in 1826, nothing came of this idea.

### Dictator of Colombia

At the end of 1826, Bolivar returned to Colombia to find Venezuela in rebellion. Re-elected to another four-year term as president, Bolivar stopped a possible civil war by promising the Venezuelans to reform the constitution.

Bolivar called a convention in 1828, hoping it would adopt the constitution he wrote for Bolivia. But the convention divided into factions and disbanded, plunging the nation into chaos. The wealthy landowners, fearing revolts by

slaves and the mixed-race classes, agreed to make Bolivar the temporary dictator of Colombia.

As dictator, Bolivar ruled thoughtfully. He attempted to speed up the abolition of slavery. He decreed that forests belonged to the public and required permits to prevent "excessive harvesting" of trees.

Jealous political rivals, however, spread false rumors that Bolivar wanted to be king. Venezuela again rebelled, and Bolivar barely escaped an assassination plot. Finally, in January 1830, he called a new constitutional convention and announced the end of his dictatorship and political career.

In May, Venezuela and Ecuador declared their independence from Colombia. News came that Gen. Sucre, Bolivar's only possible political heir, had been assassinated. Bolivar intended to go to Europe into exile, but he was too weak to travel due to advanced tuberculosis.

On December 10, 1830, the Liberator issued his final proclamation. He again pleaded for the unity of the Colombian people. Seven days later, he died at age 47.

Bolivar wished to be buried in Caracas. But the new leaders of

Venezuela called him a tyrant and refused his body. He was buried in Colombia, abandoned by friends and hated by enemies. Most of his enlightened reforms were soon forgotten.

This rejection of the Liberator did not last long. In 1842, he was reburied in Caracas. Today, this man of action and ideas is celebrated as the outstanding revolutionary hero of South America.

### For Discussion and Writing

1. Why did Bolivar reject the U.S. form of government for the liberated nations of Spanish South America?
2. Bolivar sought a middle way between U.S. democracy and British monarchy. How did he attempt to do this in the Bolivian Constitution?
3. Toward the end of his life, Bolivar wrote, "Those who serve a revolution plow the sea." What do you think he meant by this?

### For Further Reading

Bushnell, David. *Simon Bolivar: Liberation and Disappointment*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Lynch, John. *Simon Bolivar: A Life*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006.

## ACTIVITY

### Bolivar's Best and Worst Ideas

In small groups, students discuss Bolivar's ideas listed below. Each group then ranks these ideas 1 to 10 from best to worst. The groups then defend their choices for Bolivar's best and worst ideas.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Bolivar's vow to liberate his homeland.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His "war to the death."
- \_\_\_\_\_ His confiscation of Spanish and royalist land to redistribute to his liberation army.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His belief that a nation's form of government should fit the conditions of the people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His advocacy for a president for life with the power to choose his successor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His conclusion that the people of Spanish South America were not ready for U.S.-style democracy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His view that there should be legal equality for all races and classes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His conviction that slavery was incompatible with a free nation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His reforms to benefit Indians and preserve forest resources.
- \_\_\_\_\_ His concept of religious toleration and separation of church and state.

## Standards Addressed

### Simon Bolivar

**National High School World History Standard 32: Understands the causes and consequences of political revolutions in the late 18th and 19th centuries.** (2) Understands comparisons between the Latin American revolutions and those in America, France, and Haiti . . . (3) Understands the status of women and other social classes during and following the Latin American independence movements (e.g., the political roles of Creole elites, the Catholic Church, and mestizo, mu-latto, and Indian populations . . .) (5) Understands the ideas and is-sues during and after the Latin American independence movement (e.g., . . . issues that concerned New Granada after independence . . .).

**California History Social Science Standard 10.2: Students compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty.** (1) Compare the major ideas of philosophers and their effects on the democratic revolutions in England, the United States, France, and Latin America (e.g., John Locke, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Simon Bolivar, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison).

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## Sources

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## About Constitutional Rights Foundation

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