

# COLUMBIA'S WASHINGTON: HOW SIMON BOLIVAR DEFEATED THE SPANISH EMPIRE

BY  
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The success of the Colombian Revolution in the early nineteenth century was the result of a combination of intellectual leadership, popular uprisings against Spanish rule, national military organization, and the influence of the American Revolution. Yet the significance of these factors were dwarfed by a single man whose leadership and dedication to the people of South America, combined with his heroic energy and insatiable will, provided a compelling unity within Gran Colombia that laid the foundation for its independence. Often referred to as the “George Washington of South America,” Simon Bolivar was the integral catalyst of the Colombian revolution, helping to bring about both the unification of Gran Colombia and its eventual liberation from Spanish forces.<sup>1</sup> Historians today continue to debate how Bolivar managed to stimulate the emergence of such an extraordinary and unified movement for a democratic nation state in an overwhelmingly discordant country. However, a critical examination of the Colombian Revolution reveals that Bolivar’s rousing Cartagena Manifesto and his timely success in taking advantage of incipient nationalism brewing in the Spanish colonies were the two most important factors contributing to the independence of Gran Colombia.

Simon Bolivar’s famous Manifesto of Cartagena of December 15, 1812, which succeeded in galvanizing the latent people of Gran Colombia by inspiring them to take up the reins of the independence movement, was an irrefutably important document crucial to his success. The manuscript, the first by which he expounded upon his vision of sovereignty, demonstrated Bolivar’s faith in what he believed was a destined victory of independence. In this invigoratingly authoritarian analysis, Bolivar appealed to Gran Colombians to join in continental collaboration to initiate a movement for the liberation of South America. As he so eloquently stated in

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Rourke, *Man of Glory: Simon Bolivar*, William Morrow, ed. (Rahway, N.J.: William Morrow and Company, 2011), 279.

his moving manifesto: “New Grenada’s [freedom] depends upon her assumption of the task of liberating the cradle of Latin American independence, its martyrs and those meritorious people of Caracas whose outcries can only be directed to their beloved compatriots, the New Granadans. . . . Let us fly quickly to avenge the dead, to give life to the dying, freedom to the oppressed and liberty to all!”<sup>2</sup> Openly beseeching an audience of republicans, Bolivar used his Cartagena Manifesto to meticulously dismantle the mythical invincibility of Spanish colonial rule, underscoring the empire’s veiled focus on colonial exploitation in pursuit of greater wealth. Spain had developed an indifference to the rapidly depleting resources of the colonies. To Bolivar, such an apathetic form of rule was a recipe for stagnation and abuse. While other European nations advanced with new agricultural, industrial, or commercial developments, Spain merely marked time, inhibiting the growth of Gran Colombia under its oppressive regime.<sup>3</sup>

Passionately calling upon Gran Colombians to take up the fight against a mother country that was becoming progressively more abusive, he claimed that the “good name” of Gran Colombia depended on his people’s willingness to march to Venezuela, thus initiating a new era free from Spanish subjugation.<sup>4</sup> Bolivar’s searing denunciations of Spain’s empirical maltreatment struck a resounding chord with the people of Gran Colombia, convincing them that the time was ripe for a movement towards independence and inspiring them to action. The document’s importance cannot be overstated, as its widespread appeal resulted in a virtually unanimous endorsement by a historically divided populace. The manifesto was, essentially, an excellent tool for unification. The proposal thus effectively led to the establishment of a cohesive purpose among Gran Colombians, compelling them to break free from the shackles of Spain and ultimately played a significant role in bringing about the eventual independence of Gran Colombia.

An equally important factor contributing to Bolivar’s success in establishing Gran Colombian independence was his shrewd use of a rapidly growing, incipient local nationalism within the colonies. As an organized political movement designed to further the cause of Gran Colombian independence, nationalism was at the heart of Bolivar’s plan for revolution.<sup>5</sup> The growing alienation between Spain and its colonized therefore proved to

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Harvey, *Liberators: Latin America’s Struggle for Independence* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2000), 241.

<sup>3</sup> Rourke, 253.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Belaunde, *Bolivar and the Political Thought of the Spanish American Revolution* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1938), 171-172.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey, 224.

be an invaluable asset to Bolivar as he endeavored to invoke popular support for a revolt against Spain. Growing resentment by all segments of society towards the increasingly restrictive and oppressive policies of the Spanish culminated to help Bolivar unite what had previously been a vehemently divided people.<sup>6</sup> Through a series of intense speeches, proclamations, and documents, he masterfully highlighted both the futile and insidious nature of a "Spanish America." What was becoming an increasingly evident atmosphere of disgust and nationalistic fervor was thereby fueled. Arguing that Spain's unjust and oppressive practices had severed its ties with Gran Colombia, Bolivar called upon the exploited to defend their natural rights, effectively drawing attention to the ambiguous nature of Gran Colombia's national identity which, under Spanish rule, revolved around political passivity. Most despotic rulers, he argued, had at least an organized system of oppression in which the subordinate people were able to participate at various levels of administration. Yet, under Spanish absolutism, Gran Colombians were denied the ability to exercise any functions of government or internal administration.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly obvious examples of inequality and discrimination found in Gran Colombia served to strengthen the appeal of Bolivar's insistence that Spain was depriving Americans of economic opportunity and public office. The masses, already incensed by the impact of low prices, high taxation, and the prohibition of trade with countries other than Spain, were undoubtedly drawn to these searing denunciations.<sup>8</sup> As an ambiance of loathing and infuriation began to brew, a popular belief that it was time to finally take action against the Spanish Crown manifested itself in Gran Colombia under the leadership of Bolivar.<sup>9</sup> His well-timed success in taking advantage of the powerful nationalism stimulated by Spain's inept control of the colonies infused his efforts to provoke a revolt with a renewed zeal, creating an ingenuity that undoubtedly played a key role in his eventual triumph of Gran Colombia independence.

There will undoubtedly be those who disagree with these arguments pertaining to how Bolivar's rousing Cartagena Manifesto, in combination with his opportune success in taking advantage of the incipient nationalism in the Spanish colonies, effectively led to the independence of Gran Colombia. It is often suggested that, although the Manifesto of Cartagena was conclusively important in stimulating a base of popular support for revolt, it did not play a significant role in guaranteeing the eventual establishment of independence, as the overwhelmingly weak and indecisive

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<sup>6</sup> Gail R. Pool, "Culture, Language, and Revolution in Grenada," *Anthropologica* Vol. 36, (1994): 73-107.

<sup>7</sup> Pam M. Holt, *The Dauntless Liberator* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 110-11.

<sup>8</sup> Rourke, 265.

<sup>9</sup> Belaunde, 189.

Gran Colombian leadership at the time essentially assured the acceptance of Bolivar's proposal. In addition, it is commonly believed among many historians that Bolivar did not actually capitalize upon the unbridled nationalism that weakened Spain's control, as he was never able to amass an army of supporters numbering more than ten thousand. They assert that, although Bolivar further incited the unchecked nationalism within Gran Colombia, he ultimately did a poor job of harnessing patriotic "fervor" into a weapon to be used in the fight for independence.<sup>10</sup> These arguments are valid, as it is understandably important to acknowledge the factors that may have undermined the effectiveness of Bolivar's campaign. Yet these contentions are wrong: of all the revolutionists in Latin America, Bolivar was the leader with the most powerful sense of purpose who was able to impose his good will upon others. His assumption that a publicized analysis of the Spanish Empire's exploitive intentions, along with an efficient mobilization of a burgeoning nationalism, were needed to initiate a movement to free Gran Colombia from the chains of Spanish rule explain the reasoning behind Bolivar's actions. As history shows, he reasoned wisely.

What the battle for Gran Colombian independence required, against one of the largest and most ruthless military machines the world has ever known, was a man of strength, aggression, and no caution at all. He was a crazed, ruthless *criollo* without fear or inhibitions.<sup>11</sup> The liberation of Gran Colombia was not a task for a faint-hearted individual, but for a man with a clear sense of purpose capable of directing the masses. Bolivar fit this role perfectly, and his legendary character has slowly developed into a symbol of freedom from tyranny, a warning against foreign danger, and an irresistible force of freedom. Historians today continue to dispute how Bolivar succeeded in inspiring a unified movement that succeeded in freeing Gran Colombia from Spanish rule. However, an in-depth analysis of Bolivar's stirring Manifesto of Cartagena, as well as a critical evaluation of his opportune ingenuity in taking advantage of the fervent nationalism spreading within the colonies, underscores how these were the two most important factors contributing to Bolivar's success. Arguably the greatest general in the history of Latin America and one of the most influential leaders the world has ever seen, Simon Bolivar's accomplishments in the face of such daunting odds are enduring, and his legacy remains timeless.

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.