

## Excerpts from Simon Bolívar's Speech to the Congress at Angostura, 1819

### Bolivar on Latin American Society

*Bolivar talks about the lack of experience in self government among Latin Americans*

America, on becoming separated from the Spanish monarchy, found itself like the Roman Empire, when that enormous mass fell to pieces in the midst of the ancient world. Each dismembered portion formed then an independent nation in accordance with its situation or its interests, the difference being that those members established anew their former associations. We do not even preserve the vestiges of what once we were; we are not Europeans, we are not Indians, but an intermediate species between the aborigines and the Spaniards--Americans by birth and Europeans in right, we are placed in the dilemma of disputing with the natives our titles of possession and maintaining ourselves in the country where we were born, against the opposition of the invaders. Thus, ours is a most extraordinary and complicated case. Moreover, our part has always been a purely passive one; our political existence has always been null, and we find ourselves in greater difficulties in attaining our liberty than we ever had when we lived on a plane lower than servitude, because we had been robbed not only of liberty but also of active and domestic tyranny. Allow me to explain this paradox.

They are entrusted with civil, political, military and religious functions; but in the last analysis, the Satraps of Persia are Persians, the Pashas of the Great Master are Turks, the Sultans of Tartary are Tartars. China does not send for her Mandarins to the land of Genghis Khan, her conqueror. America, on the contrary, received all from Spain, which had really deprived her of true enjoyment and exercise of active tyranny, by not permitting us to share in our own domestic affairs and interior administration. This deprivation had made it impossible for us to become acquainted with the course of public affairs; neither did we enjoy that personal consideration which the glamour of power inspires in the eyes of the multitude, so important in the great revolutions. I will say, in short, we were kept in estrangement, absent from the universe and all that relates to the science of government.

*Bolivar talks about the divergent nature of the Latin American population.*

Permit me to call the attention of Congress to a matter which may be of vital importance. We must bear in mind that our population is not the people of Europe, not of North America, that it is rather a composite of Africa and America, which is an offspring of Europe. Spain herself ceases to be European on account of her African blood, her institutions and her temperament. It is impossible to point out with preciseness to what

human family we belong. The greater portion of the natives has been annihilated, the European has mixed with the native American and the African, and this has mixed again with the Indian and the European. All having been born of the same mother, our parents, of different origin and blood, are foreigners, and all differ visibly in color of skin. This dissimilarity is a hindrance of the greatest importance.

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*Bolivar urges the Congress to approve of one of his reforms in Venezuela.*

I would not mention to you the most notable acts of my administration, did they not concern the majority of the Venezuelans. I refer, gentlemen, to the most important resolutions taken in this last period. Atrocious, godless slavery covered with its sable mantle the land of Venezuela and our skies were overcast with storm clouds threatening a deluge of fire. I implored the protection of the God of Humanity, and Redemption scattered the storm. Slavery broke its chains and Venezuela has found herself surrounded by her new children, grateful children who have turned their instruments of captivity into arms of liberty. Yea, those who were slaves are now free; those who were the enemies of their foster mother are now the defenders of a country. To emphasize the justice, the necessity, the beneficent results of this measure, is superfluous, when you know the history of the Helots, Spartacus and Haiti; when you know that one cannot be free and enslaved at the same time, unless in violation of the laws of nature and the civil and political laws. I leave to your sovereign decision the reform or abrogation of all my statutes and decrees; but I implore of you the confirmation of the absolute freedom of the slaves, as I would beg for my life and the life of the Republic.

*Bolivar talks about the future of Gran Colombia.*

The merging of New Granada and Venezuela into one Great State, has been the unanimous wish of the peoples and the government of both republics. The fortunes of war have effected this union so earnestly desired by all Colombians; in fact, we are incorporated. These sister countries have already entrusted to you their interests, their rights and their destinies. In contemplating the union of these countries my soul rises to the heights demanded by the colossal perspective of such a wonderful picture. Soaring among the coming ages my imagination rests on the future centuries, and seeing from afar with admiration and amazement the prosperity, the splendor and the life which have come to this vast region, I feel myself carried away, and I see her in the very heart of the universe, stretching along her lengthy shores between two oceans which Nature has separated, but which our country unites through long wide channels. I can see her as the bond, as the center, as the emporium of the human family. I can see her sending to all the corners of the globe the treasure hidden in her mountains of silver and gold; I see her sending broadcast, by means of her divine plants, health and life to the sufferers of the old world; I see her confiding her precious secrets to the learned who do not know how much her store of knowledge is superior to the store of wealth bestowed by Nature upon her; I can see her sitting on the throne of liberty, the scepter of justice in her hand, crowned by glory, showing the old world the majesty of the modern world.

## Bolivar on Constitutional Theory

*Bolivar granted that democracy was great in theory, but not so great in practice.*

Only democracy, in my opinion, is susceptible of absolute freedom. But where is there a democratic government that has united at the same time power, prosperity and permanence? Have we not seen, on the contrary, aristocracy, monarchy rearing great and powerful empires for centuries and centuries? What government is there older than that of China? What republic has exceeded in duration that of Sparta, that of Venice? The Roman Empire, did it not conquer the world? Does not France count fourteen centuries of monarchy? Who is greater than England? These nations, however, have been, or still are, aristocracies and monarchies.

The more I admire the excellence of the Federal Constitution of Venezuela, the more I am persuaded of the impossibility of its application in our State. And, in my opinion, it is a wonder that its model in North America may endure so successfully, and is not upset in the presence of the first trouble or danger. Notwithstanding the fact that that people is a unique model of political virtues and moral education; notwithstanding that it has been cradled in liberty, that it has been reared in freedom and lives on pure liberty, I will say more, although in many respects that people is unique in the history of humanity, it is a prodigy, I repeat, that a system so weak and complicated as the federal system should have served to govern that people in circumstances as difficult and delicate as those which have existed. But, whatever the case may be, as regards the American Nation. I must say that nothing is further from my mind than to try to assimilate the conditions and character of two nations as different as the Anglo-American and the Spanish-American. Would it not be extremely difficult to apply to Spain the Code of political, civil and religious liberty of England? It would be even more difficult to adapt to Venezuela the laws of North America.

Let us not be presumptuous. Legislators, let us be moderate in our pretensions. It is not likely that we should attain that which humanity has not succeeded in attaining, what the greatest and wisest nations never attained. Indefinite liberty, absolute democracy are the rocks upon which all republican hopes have been wrecked. Cast your eye over the ancient republics, the modern republics, the rising republics; almost all have tried to establish themselves as absolute democracies.

*Bolivar wanted to see a hereditary Senate.*

....These Senators would be elected by Congress the first time. The succession to the Senate should engage the first attention of the government, which would educate them in a college specially devoted to instructing these tutors, future legislators of the country. They should

learn the arts, sciences and letters, the accomplishments of the mind of public men; from childhood they should know the career to which Providence has destined them, and from a tender age they should temper their soul to the dignity awaiting them.

The creation of a hereditary Senate would be in nowise a violation of political equality; I do not pretend to establish a nobility because, as a famous republican has said, it would be to destroy at the same time equality and liberty. It is a calling for which candidates must be prepared; it is an office requiring much knowledge and the proper means to become learned in it. Everything must not be left to chance and fortune in the elections; the people are more easily deceived than Nature perfected by art, and although it is true that these Senators would not spring from the womb of Perfection, it is also true that they would spring from the womb of a learned education. On the other hand, the liberators of Venezuela are entitled to hold, always, a high rank in the republic which owes its existence to them! I believe that posterity would grieve to see the effacement of the illustrious names of their first benefactors.... And if the people of Venezuela do not applaud the elevation of their benefactors, they are unworthy of being a free people, and never will be free.

Nothing whatever could corrupt a legislative body vested with the highest honors, self-dependent, having nothing to fear from the people, and nothing to expect from the government; having no other object than the repression of all elements of evil, and the fostering of all elements of good, and having the greatest interest in the existence of a society, in the good or bad results of which it must participate. It has been very justly said that the Upper House of England is invaluable to the nation because it is a bulwark to liberty, and I may add, that the Senate of Venezuela would be not only a bulwark to liberty but a support to make the republic everlasting.

*Bolivar's vision of a government with a separation of powers:*

The people of Venezuela already enjoy the rights they can legitimately and easily enjoy. Let us moderate, now, the pressure of excessive pretensions, which the form of a government not suited to their needs might perhaps excite. Let us abandon the federal forms not suited to us; let us abandon the triumvirate of the Executive Power and center it in one President; let us grant him sufficient authority to enable him to struggle against the obstacles anent our recent condition, the state of war we are in, and the kind of foreign and domestic enemies against whom we will have to battle for a long time. Let the Legislative Power relinquish the functions belonging to the Executive and acquire, notwithstanding, a new consistency, a new influence in the balance of authority. Let the courts be strengthened by the stability and independence of the judges, the creation of juries, and civil and criminal codes not dictated by antiquity, nor by conquering kings, but by the voice of Nature, by the cry of Justice and by the genius of Wisdom.