



Bolívar: American Liberator

By Marie Arana
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Reviewed by
 Alan Gropman

Any U.S. military officer or civil servant yearning to earn the sobriquet “grand strategist” must understand the ethos of the countries of Latin America. While many bodies of water are of great interest to the people of the United States and its government, the Rio Grande River is a *vital* interest. A worthy way to expand one’s knowledge of the states south of that long river is to read Marie Arana’s sound and solid biography *Bolívar: American Liberator*.

Arana is an exceptionally articulate writer (her Bolívar reads like a novel because she is an outstanding stylist) who has written a brilliantly composed, exceptionally well-researched, scrupulously documented (100 pages of notes), and thorough biography of Simón Bolívar, a hero of the first stripe to South Americans today but at the same time sadly unknown to most North Americans. Bolívar is an idol in South America because he liberated Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Peru,

Ecuador, and Bolivia—almost half the continent—from atrocious Spanish autocracy. Arana takes us from Bolívar’s ancestry and birth to his death (and evisceration after burial by those desiring to possess parts of the hero), covering everything from his biological heritage, youth and education, travel, politics, military leadership, and governing capability. She tells the whole story including in nongraphic prose his “unquenchable libido.” Many below-the-Rio Grande Americans call him “the George Washington” of South America because of his military exploits.

Arana produces a three-dimensional portrait by delivering the travails, accomplishments, and failures of the South American liberator. Readers who want to understand politics south of the Rio Grande will benefit from this solid account. By learning of Bolívar’s many soldierly attributes we can understand why he is revered. Also, however, discovering Bolívar’s abundant shortcomings as a politician should leave us wondering why he is esteemed in that regard. Every state he established by conquest disappeared before or soon after his death.

Arana puts the reader inside Bolívar’s zeitgeist, explaining that Simón was a child of the 18th-century Enlightenment. He was familiar with the writings of the philosophers undergirding the European and American revolutions and admired America’s Founding Fathers.

However, he recognized the destructive flaw of slavery in the United States, despised human bondage, and was not a racist. On June 2, 1816, Bolívar affirmed total freedom for slaves in the Spanish colonies, announcing, “I have come to decree, as law full liberty to all slaves who have trembled under the Spanish yoke for three centuries.” Bolívar’s emancipation proclamation preceded freedom for slaves in the United States by half a century (and real liberty for at least 150 years), and the reasons driving it had some similarities to Abraham Lincoln’s motivations. Bolívar needed the manpower former slaves could provide to defeat the Spanish, and he directed the newly freed men to join his revolutionary armies.

Lincoln, similarly, needed blacks to fight for the Union to defeat the

Confederacy, and enlisting former slaves was one of his motivations for altering his Proclamation. In the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued after the Union “victory” at Antietam in September 1862, using blacks as Union warriors was unmentioned, but in the edict issued on January 1, 1863, it was boldly announced and produced many thousands of highly motivated black soldiers. By the time of Appomattox in April 1865, there were over 120,000 black combatants in the U.S. Army, more than all the soldiers in Robert E. Lee’s, Joe Johnston’s, and John Bell Hood’s armies combined.

With the help of former black slaves, Bolívar defeated the Spanish armies over the next 5 years, but he was a better general than politician. Arana cites his admission of his political shortcomings: “At times, it seems the hardest road of war is that which leads to peace. For Bolívar, it was ever so. ‘I am a soldier,’ he liked to say even when others begged him to be something more. Despite his well-honed faculties for social justice—despite his gift for imparting democratic ideals—he found the quotidian business of government numbing. He was a man of the sword, not the scepter. But it was the scepter he was handed when he rode triumphantly into Caracas on June 29, 1821, five days after his decisive victory” over the Spanish colonial armies.

Suffice it to say that when Bolívar died at 46, his approval rating was negative and he went largely unmourned. His beatification came when his political inabilities were forgotten and therefore forgiven, his ideas were exalted, and his military victories were elevated. Simón Bolívar is as much an immortal hero today as evidenced by autocrats like the late Hugo Chávez. Arana explains why Chávez retitled his country The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Understanding Bolívar’s gravitas and illustriousness in that continent is the beginning of comprehending the character of the United States’ closest neighbors. This biography is a must read. JFQ

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