

THE MIRROR OF PUBLIC OPINION BOLÍVAR,  
REPUBLICANISM AND THE  
UNITED STATES PRESS, 1821-1831

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*Resumen*

El carácter de Simón Bolívar es disputado tanto en la escritura norteamericana como en la latinoamericana. Se ven unas imágenes distintas de Bolívar en la prensa estadounidense de los 1820's, en la que su representación cambió de un "Washington del Sur" a un dictador napoleónico. Esta transformación ocurrió en el contexto del republicanismo en los EEUU, diferencias políticas domésticas y competencias internacionales. En particular, los republicanos consideraban dignos de elogio los sacrificios iniciales de Bolívar por la independencia de la región, pero no su propensión a considerar la autoridad centralizada casi una "tiranía" y el antagonista moral de una sociedad republicana. Unos eventos durante 1827 y 1828 en Colombia fueron centrales para las dos imágenes de Bolívar: los campos políticos en los EEUU identificaban su "dictadura" o como necesaria o como una traición de la libertad.

*Abstract*

Simón Bolívar's transformation in the US press of the 1820's from a "Washington of the South" to a Napoleon took place in the context of US republicanism, domestic political differences, and international rivalries. Republicanism, in particular, found Bolívar's initial sacrifices for the region to be commendable, but his propensity toward centralized authority to be

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akin to “tyranny,” the mortal antagonist of a republican society. Event of 1827 and 28 in Venezuela were key to this transformation, as US political camps identified Bolívar’s “dictatorship” as either necessary or a betrayal of liberty.

*The Mirror of Public Opinion: Bolívar, Republicanism and the United States Press, 1821-1831*

The image of Simón Bolívar has been shaped to serve practically every use, both during his life and in the almost two centuries since his death. In this, the memory of Bolívar is akin to “a hall of distorting mirrors in which each individual sees himself, as he thinks, truly reflected.”<sup>1</sup> The viewer shapes the viewed, so that the historical memory of the Liberator reflects the values of the observer perhaps more than those of Bolívar himself. While scholars such as Germán Carrera Damas have explored the “cult to Bolívar” in his homeland,<sup>2</sup> the manipulation of Bolívar’s image in the United States is less well known. In particular, scholars need an understanding of how the Liberator was interpreted in his lifetime, in that it helped to establish the historical image of Bolívar in the United States.

How was Bolívar viewed in the United States during his life? Clearly this can be answered from many perspectives, ranging from the “informed” opinions of diplomats or politicians who might have had contact with him, to the “average” person who most likely formed their opinion from reading the newspaper. For readers of papers, scores of papers articles were published about Bolívar, especially during the latter years of the 1820s. In this period, Bolívar’s image differs only slightly from press to press, in large part because the writers for newspapers shared a common set of cultural and political values through which they perceived the Liberator. Foremost among these values is the concept of republicanism. Differences do exist however, stemming from partisan disputes or international rivalries. More significantly, the image of Bolívar changed over time. Relatively few accounts described the Liberator in the first half of the decade, though those that did generally portrayed Bolívar as the “Washington of the South,” the ultimate accolade of republican solidarity from a US perspective. In the

<sup>1</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Bogotá, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1987. For a recent synopsis of Bolívar, please see David Bushnell, *Simón Bolívar: Hombre de Caracas, proyecto de América*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos, 2002.

wake of Colombian political struggles, Venezuelan separatist movements, and the “dictatorship” of 1828, Bolívar came to be portrayed by many editors as a tyrant or a despot, vile curses in the republican vocabulary. Some presses held on to the earlier image, albeit in modified form. The Liberator’s death stimulated a period of reflection in which the various facets of the Bolivarian image were crystallized. These final images, many of them negative, tended to persist until well into the twentieth century.

### *The Language and Lens of Republicanism*

The concept of republicanism is crucial for an understanding of the public image of Bolívar. In a land with few material or cultural achievements, the United States placed a high premium on its civic and political accomplishments. Its government was labeled as “republican,” as opposed to either aristocratic or monarchical. Under such a system, politicians envisioned a polity in which citizens were equal before the law and governed themselves through elected representatives. Citizenship, to be sure, was limited to adult white males, for whom “liberty,” the primary benefit of republican government, was available. Liberty, in turn, implied the freedom of individual material improvement, freedom from established religion, and freedom of expression, to cite the more obvious examples. Liberty did not release the citizen from social restraints, but bound him to codes of “virtue,” which were seen as the primary counter-balances to tyranny, the lethal antagonist of republicanism. Virtue implied the willingness of the citizen to set aside private interests for the public good; it was, according to Harry L. Watson, “the moral cement of republican society”. Few individuals were so virtuous that they could represent the citizens of a republic; to them fell the responsibilities of leadership. Corruption, seen as unheeded pursuit of private interests and power, was at perpetual odds with virtue, meaning that republicanism required an unceasing vigilance against subversive forces or individuals. Republicanism, therefore, was an intolerant political ideology. The world of the republican was one of stark differences, of white and black, which allowed for few shades of gray. The presumed “superiority” of republicanism over other forms of government led many to urge that other nations model themselves after the United States.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*, New York, The Noonday Press, 1990, pp. 42-49.

While republicanism shaped most opinions expressed by US newspapers, other factors influenced public sentiments. Many papers were closely associated with either partisan camps or individual politicians, so that attitudes were often slanted by internal political struggles. Local political affairs further influenced the editorial directions of particular papers, especially in cities such as New York or Washington, D. C., where national and local politics were closely intertwined. Finally, international tensions affected public opinions, especially the increased US rivalry with Great Britain over the course of the decade.

Domestic political struggles helped to establish the context in which public opinion toward Bolívar was shaped. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, the last heroes of the Independence generation, died in 1826, heralding the emergence of a new political generation. General Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Martin Van Buren, and Daniel Webster, the hierarchy of the new leadership, helped define the nation's developmental priorities, molded a more democratic political culture, established relations with the newly independent nations of Latin America, and tried to extend the US sphere of influence in the Americas.

The intense political rivalry between Jackson and Clay, in particular, fragmented public opinion of Bolívar. Jackson, a hero of the War of 1812 and the conqueror of the Creek Indian Nation, became president in 1828. He had been denied the presidency in 1824 when, despite having polled the largest number of popular votes, he lacked sufficient electoral votes to win the contest. This peculiar feature of the US constitution resulted in the election of John Quincy Adams, a decision which, according to Jackson, Clay engineered by a "corrupt bargain" to deliver Clay's electoral votes to Adams in return for his appointment as Secretary of State. When Jackson finally reached the presidency, his term in office (1829-1837) was known for its highly democratic and at times authoritarian character, tendencies which some politicians thought repulsive and anti-republican. It was also marked by a more aggressive stance toward Great Britain and certain arrogance in its international relations. Jackson tended to favor Bolívar, especially when Clay became close to Francisco de Paula Santander.

Clay, one of the most experienced politicians of the day and an opponent of Jackson since the late 1810s, had been an early (1817) advocate of United States support for Latin American independence. Indeed, in 1820 Clay spurred Don Manuel Torres to approach the United States Secretary of State John Quincy Adams as a diplomatic agent of the newly liberated regime to request the recognition of Colombian statehood. Clay, unlike Bolívar, ardently desired a US role in the Congress of Panama, but Clay's

political opponents delayed a congressional vote on instructions to the delegates, so that they never arrived at the congress. Clay's antagonism as Secretary of State toward Bolívar's increasingly ambitious rule certainly endeared Clay to Santander. When the US ambassador to Colombia, William Henry Harrison, demanded in 1829 that Bolívar chose between militarism and democracy, it certainly alienated the Liberator, though it undoubtedly heartened Santander as he began his European exile.

Shared foreign policy objectives enabled Colombia and the United States to pursue similar objectives in the early 1820s. In time, however, increasingly divergent national experiences caused their relations to flounder. Leaders of both countries envisioned an America free from the dominating influence of Europe; to this end the Monroe Doctrine and the Panama Congress offered some hope of Pan-American solidarity. Although both Bolívar and Santander valued the pragmatic support of Great Britain in the early 1820s, Santander shifted his orientation from Britain toward the United States in the wake of the US recognition of Colombia, the elaboration of President's Monroe doctrine toward the Americas, and the Colombian/US trade agreement. Santander altered Bolívar's call for an American congress that excluded the United States by extending an invitation to the northern republic in early 1825. Santander told Bolívar, "with respect to the United States, I have thought it convenient to invite them to the august Panamanian assembly, in the firm conviction that our intimate relations won't be seen with satisfaction unless our illustrious and sincere friends take part in the deliberations."<sup>4</sup> Bolívar informed his vice-president that "A federation with the United States will compromise our interests with England because the Americans are the only rivals of the English in the Americas. Examine this question carefully; I look forward to the result of your considerations, because it might compromise the principles that we have conceived."<sup>5</sup> Bolívar insisted that Santander's move to include the United States in the Congress was "dangerous" in that it promised to alienate the British, who "are omnipotent and because of this terrifying."<sup>6</sup>

Bolívar's preference toward Great Britain stained his public image in the US. It, however, endeared him to anglophile papers such as the *Albion* of New York City, perhaps the most out-spoken pro-British paper in the

<sup>4</sup> Francisco de Paula Santander to Simón Bolívar, Bogotá, febrero 6 de 1825, *Cartas Santander-Bolívar, 1823-1825*, Bogotá, Fundación Francisco de Paula Santander, 1988, p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> Bolívar to Santander, 7 de abril de 1825, Lima, *Cartas*, IV, p. 343.

<sup>6</sup> Bolívar to Santander, 20 de mayo de 1825, Arequipa, *Cartas*, IV, p. 376.

United States. By contrast, the comments of the editors of the *New York Daily Advertiser*, Theodore Dwight and William B. Townsend, asserted in 1832 that “General Bolívar ... was intriguing with foreigners, principally British subjects, to establish a monarchy over that newly emancipated country,”<sup>7</sup> a crushing republican condemnation in that monarchical rule threatened republicanism’s very essence. The paper noted that “during the latter part of the military and political career of the late General Bolívar of Colombia, when it was well known to the real friends of the freedom of that Republic that he entertained views hostile to its liberties and independence ... . [Santander] stood immediately in the way of the usurper, and it was necessary to remove him.”<sup>8</sup> Or, as the editors insisted on another occasion, “General Santander deserves ... the hospitality of his republican friends in the United States. At the head of his countrymen he stood against the tremendous power of Bolívar.”<sup>9</sup>

Opinions in the United States press toward the Liberator are found in many papers, though the *Niles’ Weekly Register* is an indispensable source for historians of the period. Begun in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1811 by Hezekiah Niles, the paper operated until 1848. Niles’ son, William Ogden, took over the paper in 1827. The *Niles’ Weekly Register* included local, national, and international news that ranged from political events, to commercial records, editorials, weather reports, and unusual occurrences. Although Hezekiah had been a relatively unbiased editor, William Ogden’s strong commitment to the Democratic-Republican party of Clay became increasingly apparent through the 1820s.

It is customary to use newspapers as sources of information without fully acknowledging the influence that *their* sources had upon their news. A varied range of sources supplied newspapers with information. A March 1830 article about Bolívar, Venezuela, and Colombia, for example, illustrates the range of materials. The article made reference to the *St. Thomas Times* of February 20, from which two proclamations by General José Antonio Páez were transcribed and which included information that came from passengers on the schooner “Aurora” (recently arrived from Puerto Cabello), information drawn from two New York City newspapers about the

<sup>7</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, 17 de enero de 1832, in: *Santander y la opinión angloamericana: Visión de viajeros y periódicos, 1821-1840*, Bogotá, Fundación Francisco de Paula Santander, 1991, p. 345.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, 17 de enero de 1832, in: *Santander y la opinión angloamericana*, pp. 345, 346.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, 18 de enero de 1832, in: *Santander y la opinión angloamericana*, p. 351.

constituent congress of Colombia and a speech by Antonio José de Sucre, and intelligence gained through personal correspondence. The paper thanked an ex-consul to Peru for his “intelligence and important documents,” an indication of the dual role played by officials of the government. Newspapers often drew upon official reports, whose manipulative character is most readily apparent, even if they offer only a limited image of an event. Very seldom did a US paper report on the orientation of a foreign newspaper, save perhaps in the instance of the Jamaican press, where the pro-British bias was abundantly clear. Private correspondents offered a limited perspective of Colombian affairs, quite often from a commercial point of view.

### *From a Washington to a Tyrant: The Burden of Events*

Bolívar’s initial public image appeared in a guise quite familiar to members of the US political body, that of George Washington, the country’s first president. Bolívar earned the praise of the *Niles’ Weekly Register* for offering to resign as executive of Colombia in 1821, just as had Washington, moves deemed appropriate for republican public servants. A public servant, it was thought, did not seek office and served only when public loyalty required such service. This, in the words of the *Register*, offered proof of Bolívar’s “disinterestedness and magnanimity.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, “this great and good man is about to consummate his glory, by following, throughout, the example of Washington: indeed, it seems that he will proceed a little further, and become a private citizen and refuse the presidency of Colombia.”<sup>11</sup> Andrew Jackson toasted the Liberator in the same vein, raising his glass to

Bolívar, inspired by the same divinity that guided the contest of in our revolution, who has given liberty and independence to his country. That he will resign his commission before the people, who are the only legitimate source of power, whereupon he will become the companion of our own immortal Washington.<sup>12</sup>

When the *New York Mercantile Advertiser* rumored that Bolívar had been offered a crown by the kings of Spain and France to rule Peru, one paper remarked that he had refused, “in a manner worthy of Washington.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, October 27, 1821.

<sup>11</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, April 16, 1825.

<sup>12</sup> *Gaceta de Colombia*, May 15, 1825.

<sup>13</sup> *United States Gazette*, March 8, 1825.

Henry Clay, at a January 1, 1825 dinner offered by Lafayette, toasted “Gen. Bolivar, the Washington of South America, and the republic of Colombia.”<sup>14</sup> No greater accolade could be offered in the United States.

This familiarization of Bolívar extended to the region that he helped to liberate. A toast at a dinner in honor of Benjamin Franklin proclaimed “South America -- a garden of freedom, may it soon be cleared of superfluous weeds.”<sup>15</sup> The Patriot victory at Ayacucho earned a toast at a dinner in honor of John Quincy Adams to “Bolivar and his army. Their late glorious victory has finished their work.”<sup>16</sup> Numerous reports offered accounts of the battle, which rid the “New World” of the Inquisition and, it was hoped, of tyranny.<sup>17</sup> The reference to the New World, allegedly destined to be free from religious and military intolerance, offers a widely held perception of the joined future of the hemisphere.

A perceived willingness to sacrifice military power for public service was not the only characteristic that boosted Bolívar’s esteem in the US press. Republicanism demanded religious liberty and professed equality before the law. The culture of the United States, steeped in Protestant sentiment, was extremely distrustful of Catholicism, a fear that occasionally erupted into incidents of violence against practitioners of that faith. Many feared as well the influence of the Pope over Catholics; a trepidation that resulted in frequent attacks on “Popism.” The rumored flight of thousands of priests from Peru in 1825, implicitly because of the triumph of Bolívar, generated sympathy for the “non-king-loving Bolivar.” Further praise followed the abolition of the Peruvian *mita*, which would allegedly allow Indians to live as “citizens,” equal before the law to all other Peruvians.<sup>18</sup> The partial abolition of slavery in Colombia sustained the belief in various presses that the principles of republican equality were spreading throughout Latin America (even while millions languished in bondage in the United States).<sup>19</sup>

Very few reports about Bolívar emerged in the early 1820s to tarnish this republican image. As one paper commented in 1825, “the more we hear of Bolívar, the more we want to know of him. He is one of the rare men that seem as if formed for the redemption of a nation. The glory of our Wash-

<sup>14</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, April 24, 1830.

<sup>15</sup> *United States Gazette*, January 29, 1825.

<sup>16</sup> *United States Gazette*, March 11, 1825.

<sup>17</sup> *United States Gazette*, March 4, 1825.

<sup>18</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, December 31, 1825.

<sup>19</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, May 20, 1826. See also *United States Gazette*, February 25, 1825.



ington, thus far, is his -- may it be perpetual!"<sup>20</sup> Even the grant of dictatorial powers to Bolívar by the Congress of Peru was dismissed amid the greater praise for his suggestion of a Lanchesterian system of education.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps predictably, information that contradicted the image of Bolívar as Washington was resolved in a manner that tended to favor the Liberator. A report from November 1826 observed that:

There is a strong report that Bolivar will be invested with absolute power, and that the government of Colombia will partake largely of a military despotism – if so, we may expect a monarchy. Indeed, from many things which we have seen and heard, we are apprehensive that Bolívar is about to resign his pretensions to the character of the “Washington of the South.” We would yet hope not—but much allowance must be made for temporary acts of *power* in South America, because of the ignorant and bigoted people to be governed—not accustomed to yield much to *reason*, and ruled by *force*. It takes a long while to raise up a populace capable of sustaining a free and stable government.<sup>22</sup>

Here is evidence that US republicanism reasoned that people are not by nature republicans, but become so only in situations of freedom, religious liberty, and benign leadership. This attitude harshly condemned the influence of the monarchical, Catholic rule of Spain on independent Colombians. Given these conditions, the urgency for a “Washington” was all the greater.

Washington, however, never faced the dissolution of his country. Abraham Lincoln succeeded in maintaining the unity of the United States only after four years of war. Antagonisms between Caracas and Bogotá confronted the Liberator with a fateful decision and set in motion a sequence of events that transformed his image in the United States. The 1826 revolt by José Antonio Páez was followed closely in the US press, as were the movements of Bolívar.<sup>23</sup> The Páez insurrection threatened the republican experiment in the south in the opinions of many interpreters. “Nothing can settle these elements but the arrival of Bolivar; his name would act like a charm; all parties would look up to him, and I have no doubt will submit to him without a word.”<sup>24</sup> Widespread concern about the dictatorial nature of General Páez and threat of Colombian instability were temporarily allayed

<sup>20</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, April 30, 1825.

<sup>21</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, July 2, 1825.

<sup>22</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, November 18, 1826.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 9, 1827.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from J. A. G. Williamson, US consul at “Laguayra” to the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 1, 1827.

by the return of Bolívar to Colombia, which enabled “the general appearance of things [to change] for the better.”<sup>25</sup> However, Bolívar’s failure to censor Páez for his revolt dumfounded many US observers, as did his restoration of the *llanero* to executive status. The persistence of civil disorder and growing political divisions echoed ominously in the press that, while still loyal to Bolívar, revealed decreased confidence in the leadership of the Liberator. The *Niles’ Weekly Register*, long a faithful supporter, now questioned Bolívar’s sincerity in offering once again to retire from public office. Its editor wrote that “the effect of Bolívar retaining the presidency has been that the people have lost confidence in him,” although the editor reasoned that Bolívar’s continuation in office was because “his primary loyalties are with his country.”<sup>26</sup>

Observers of the Colombian political scene were hard-pressed in 1827 and 1828 to confidently predict the course of events. The militaristic Páez was balanced by Francisco de Paula Santander, who would soon supplant Bolívar in the eyes of many as the best hope for republicanism in the southern hemisphere. Santander’s name had appeared infrequently in the United States press during the early 1820s. These accounts usually made cursory reference to his position as vice president or reproduced a formal address for US readers.<sup>27</sup> An 1826 article speaks of Santander’s sponsorship of a dance in honor of Bolívar’s birthday as evidence of the vice president’s appreciation “of his illustrious friend,”<sup>28</sup> although the increasing conflicts between these two men in the wake of Páez’s rebellion brought Santander into clearer focus.

It again is stated that a perfectly good understanding subsists between Santander and president Bolívar; the only difference event of *opinion* being that Santander has never approved the anti-republican features in the Bolivan [sic] constitution. He has, however, earnestly insisted upon the continuance of the liberator in the station of president of the republic, and the congress has refused to accept his own resignation of the vice-presidency.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, December 23, 1826.

<sup>26</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, July 14, 1827.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Santander’s address to the Colombian congress in 1823 which was reproduced in the *Niles’ Weekly Register*, July 28, 1823.

<sup>28</sup> “Colombia,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, 7 de enero, 1826, in: *Santander y la opinión angloamericana*, p. 259.

<sup>29</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, September 8, 1827.

When a widely read paper reported in March 1827 that “Bolívar’s conduct on his return to Colombia, both to his friends and enemies appears to give rise to much speculation, and to have puzzled the knowing ones,”<sup>30</sup> the allusion to the vice president must have been clear. Insofar as Santander reportedly “still holds a bold and manly tone, speaking without timidity and without disguise of things and men as they were,”<sup>31</sup> it seems improbable that a “perfectly good understanding” in fact existed “between Santander and president BOLIVAR.” In fact, according to Gerhard Masur, by this time “the rupture between the two leading figures of Greater Colombia was complete and had become public knowledge” in Colombia.<sup>32</sup>

### *Bolívar as Napoleon*

The events of 1828 shattered the Washingtonian image of Bolívar. Increasingly, the Liberator was referred to as “despotic,” “dictatorial,” or “tyrannical,” words used by republicans to describe Napoleon. Rightly or wrongly, the 1827 constitutional crisis that led to the Convention of Ocaña was perceived by many editors as indicative of Bolívar’s propensity for dictatorial behavior. A pro-Adams/Clay newspaper from Boston summarized events in Colombia under the telling label of “Jacksonism triumphant in Colombia,” a title that linked militarism in the two countries.<sup>33</sup>

Still, the old image of Bolívar was hard to abandon. “Even though we do not want to believe all that we hear, we feel obligated to believe that this distinguished leader has lost all pretensions to be called ‘the Washington of the South’ that one time was so commonly used.”<sup>34</sup> Phrases such as “extraordinary powers” and “uncalled for force” were hardly proper for a “Washington of the South.” The extraordinary powers granted to the Liberator, which to some warranted the label “dictatorship,”<sup>35</sup> were described along with the political events after Ocaña,<sup>36</sup> but with a sense of uncertainty about how to judge Bolívar. The apparent tranquility seen by foreigners and the stabilization of Colombia’s financial situation seem to offset the powers

<sup>30</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, March 31, 1827.

<sup>31</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, September 8, 1827.

<sup>32</sup> Gerhard Masur, *Simón Bolívar*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969, p. 435.

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 15, 1827.

<sup>34</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, May 5, 1828.

<sup>35</sup> David Bushnell, “The Last Dictatorship: Betrayal or Consummation,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 63: 1, February 1983, pp. 65-105.

<sup>36</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, August 9, 1828.

of the *jefe supremo*, for while “the *quo amino* of Bolívar defies speculation, [it is] hard to presume he is not actuated by love of country.”<sup>37</sup> A report from the *Baltimore Gazette* captures this sentiment in precise detail. After printing Bolívar’s August 27 declaration of supreme power —“until you order me to lay it down”— the paper’s editors declared, “May it be as beneficial as Bolívar promises, and as short lived. He may yet, if he pleases, use his power for the public good and again renounce it.”<sup>38</sup>

This turn of events also shook many editors’ confidence in the people of the region. The Philadelphia *United States Gazette* wrote that “we have heard the idea scouted, that the South American Republics were not yet prepared for a free government, [and] we believe that facts are fast developing themselves, that will go far toward giving colour to such an opinion.”<sup>39</sup> The assassination attempt on Bolívar’s life helped to further undermine a sense of shared future of the Americas. A May 1829 article lamented that Colombia “is not prepared to enjoy the privileges of a liberal constitution” in which “moral force” dominates “physical triumphs.” It is the people of South America who must change, who must dissipate the “ignorance imbibed from the mother country...”<sup>40</sup> Santander’s “prominent role” in the attempt soured his rise to republican glory, leading to suggestions that “only Bolívar” could save the country.<sup>41</sup> The *Niles’ Weekly Register* lamented “we have now lost much of our hope for ... the establishment of new republics in the south,” a fate determined primarily by the shortcomings of its people and the shortage of “‘moral power,’ that until now has been demonstrated as so important in our own country.”<sup>42</sup>

In the period after the assassination attempt, two sets of opinions characterized the Liberator. One continued to hold him in high praise, suggesting that situations beyond his control, brought on by inadequacies of the people had forced Bolívar to assume an increasingly strong leadership role. The other opinion laid blame for the course of events on the shortcomings of the president, whose republican flaws were made evident in his refusal to relinquish power and return to civilian life as did Washington.

While it has not been the intention of this article to delve into what Bolívar thought of the United States, justice requires a few comments, particularly at a point when the image of the Liberator had become entwined

<sup>37</sup> Similar comments are made in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 7, 1828.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in the *Niles’ Weekly Register*, October 25, 1828.

<sup>39</sup> *United States Gazette*, August 11, 1828.

<sup>40</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, May 2, 1829.

<sup>41</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, November 15, 1828.

<sup>42</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, November 28, 1828.

with the perceived character of the people over which he ruled. Part of his address to the Second National Congress of Venezuela highlighted many of the differences in political culture that defined the tortuous shift in the public opinion of Bolívar.

Although the people of North America are a singular model of political virtue and moral rectitude; although that nation was cradled in liberty, reared on freedom, and maintained by liberty alone; and —I must reveal everything— although those people, so lacking in many respects, are unique in the history of mankind, it is a marvel, I repeat, that so weak and complicated a government as the federal system has managed to govern them in the difficult and trying circumstances of their past. But, regardless of the effectiveness of this form of government with respect to North America, I must say that it has never for a moment entered my mind to compare the position and character of two states as dissimilar as the English-American and the Spanish-America... Does not *L'Esprit des lois* state that laws should be suited to the people for whom they are made; that it would be a major coincidence if those of one nation could be adapted to another; ... [laws] should be in keeping with the degree of liberty that the Constitution can sanction respecting the religion of the inhabitants, their inclinations, resources, number, commerce, habits, and customs? This is the code we must consult, not the code of Washington!<sup>43</sup>

Bolívar revealed sensitivity to the cultural influences on the construction of a political fabric and recognized that leadership in distinct cultures followed separate trajectories, a far greater degree of sensitivity that he received from his North American counterparts. Bolívar commented in 1829 that “I am well aware of the current opinion in the United States respecting my political conduct. It is unfortunate that we cannot achieve the happiness of Colombia with the laws and customs of [North] Americans.”<sup>44</sup>

For many, Bolívar had come full circle. From the “Washington of the South,” “Bolívar has become a traitor to liberty.” “The accounts from Colombia, if to be relied on, pretty clearly shew that Bolívar has become a traitor to liberty. We have long feared this, but yet hoped the preservation of the republic. In time, and after the military spirit has been fully subjected to the civil power, Colombia might be regenerated and peopled with a hardy and generous race of men.”<sup>45</sup> Disillusionment with the shared future of the

<sup>43</sup> Simón Bolívar, “Address Delivered at the Inauguration of the Second National Congress of Venezuela in Angostura,” February 15, 1819, *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, compiled by Vicente Lecuna, ed. by Harold A. Bierck, Jr., trans. by Lewis Bertrand, 2 vols., New York, The Colonial Press, Inc., 1951, I, pp. 179-80.

<sup>44</sup> Bolívar to Colonel Belford Hinton Wilson, Guayaquil, August 3, 1829, *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, II, p. 729.

<sup>45</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 2, 1830.

Americas had faded as the rule of generals became increasingly common in the former Spanish empire.<sup>46</sup> The death throes of the Colombian experiment generated a stark comparison between Bolívar and Washington. Bolívar's role in the political and military struggles of 1830 were subject to biting sarcasm, such as in the reproduction of his January 2 speech wherein he offered to resign before the meeting of the constituent congress. "It will thus be seen that for the seventeenth time Bolivar has made a parade of resigning his arbitrary power."<sup>47</sup> Bolívar's actual resignation in March 1830 provoked little comment in the US press. The separation of Colombia and the fate of the three new nations were followed closely, but the departure of the Liberator from power reduced his public visibility. The *Niles' Weekly Register* commented bitterly that: "The dominion of Bolivar appears to be completely destroyed—and he was said to be endeavoring to reach Carthage ... *Sic transit gloria mundi*— and so may all tyrants be hurled from power to injure their fellow men."<sup>48</sup>

A most unusual manipulation of public opinion further weakened the image of Bolívar in April 1830. The Washington *Daily National Journal* published an 1827 letter from Bolívar to Henry Clay and Clay's 1828 response to the Liberator.<sup>49</sup> The release of these official documents to the press represented a powerful statement of Clay's opposition to Bolívar. Clay's opinion of Bolívar had undergone a marked transformation in the years after his 1825 toast. By late 1827 he recounted the events that helped change his mind. In a letter to Lafayette, Clay wrote that Bolívar "has grown, I understand, passionate, impatient and overbearing, and takes Bonaparte as his model. Was ever man guilty of greater folly? What glory awaited him, if he had been true to Liberty and to his Country! Greater than every man has acquired or can achieve."<sup>50</sup> Clay's letter, carried by special envoy William Henry Harrison to Bogotá, speaks bluntly of the writer's "withdrawal of confidence" from Bolívar. The US secretary expressed his deep-seated republican mistrust of standing armies and military power, against which only "some great and virtuous man" could assure a republican future. This man, he had hoped, would be Bolívar.

<sup>46</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, February 20, 1830.

<sup>47</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, March 13, 1830.

<sup>48</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, May 29, 1830.

<sup>49</sup> *Daily National Journal*, April 17, 1830.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Clay to Lafayette, Washington, August 10, 1827, in: *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 6, *Secretary of State, 1827*, Mary W. M. Hargreaves and James F. Hopkins, eds., Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1981, p. 873.

I cannot allow myself to believe that your Excellency will abandon the bright and glorious path which lies plainly before you, for the bloody road, passing over the liberties of the human race, on which the vulgar crowd of tyrants and military despots have so often trodden. I will not doubt that your excellency will, in due time, render a satisfactory explanation to Colombia, and to the world, of those parts of your public conduct which have excited any distrust, and that, preferring the true glory of our immortal Washington, to the ignoble fame of the destroyers of liberty, you have formed the patriotic resolution of ultimately placing the freedom of Colombia upon a firm and sure foundation.<sup>51</sup>

Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* echoed these sentiments, printing, "we trust that this pointed admonition has a salutary effect upon the president liberator."<sup>52</sup> These public declarations by one of the United States' most skilled politicians, at a time when Colombian leaders jostled for control of a splintering nation, surely represented a fundamental shift of allegiance to Colombian factions associated with Santander. Indeed, Clay's supporters in the United States were ardent advocates of the "man of the laws."<sup>53</sup>

In the final years of the Liberator's life, several papers in the United States revealed the full range of contradictions contained in Bolívar's public image. The *United States Gazette* published a detailed "portrait" of Bolívar by Manuel Lorenzo de Vidaurre, who had represented Peru at the Panamanian congress.<sup>54</sup> In addition to a description of his physical person, Vidaurre depicts the complexities of the Liberator, referring to him as a man of:

strong memory, a sublime practical genius, a vast understanding, great ideas, general knowledge, a taste for military exercises, dislike to the table, hatred of constitutional laws, passion for despotism, a misconceived thirst for glory, contempt for money, a very strong propensity to deceit, frustrated on many occasions by his ardor and imprudence, variable in friendship, austere in conversation, a satirical devourer of those persons who approach him most, and whom he appears most to distinguish, lascivious without love, jealous from pride, indifferent to all religion.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, April 24, 1830.

<sup>52</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 28, 1830.

<sup>53</sup> David Sowell, "Presentación," *Santander y la opinión angloamericana, XIII-XXIII*.

<sup>54</sup> *United States Gazette*, december 12, 1828, Bolívar once described Vidaurre as an "exceptional man, but his interest is dependent upon his enthusiasm and patriotism. In addition, he is a hard work and a fine friend..." Bolívar to Manuel Pérez de Tudela, Magdalena, May 1826, *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, II, p. 611.

<sup>55</sup> *United States Gazette*, December 12, 1828.

According to Vidaurre, Bolívar's aspirations were not Washingtonian; he "wishes to be the Napoleon of America."<sup>56</sup> Other accounts repeated Vidaurre's account of Bolívar's physique, adding a brief biographical overview.<sup>57</sup>

Supporters of Bolívar in both Colombia and the United States actively sought to restore the Liberator's image to its former glory. A New York *Evening Post* article, reproduced in the *Gaceta de Colombia*, credits the tranquility of Colombia (contrasted to the civil conflicts and insecurity of the rest of the Americas) to the firm leadership of Bolívar, who survived the "knife of a nocturnal assassin," a clear reference to Santander. In the attempt to counter the prevailing public opinion, it reminds the US public that the Liberator sacrificed his personal wealth and health for the all-important cause of Independence. When civil unrest had erupted in Colombia, it occurred only when Bolívar was out of the country and was brought under control upon his return. Further, the author claims that like Washington, Bolívar created a "revolutionary army" and desired to eliminate it upon the return of peace, much to the dissatisfaction of many of the body's officer corps. The document reprints a letter written by the Liberator in which he proclaimed the dignity of his behavior and his faith in history as a measured judge. The Liberator vents his frustration over his treatment by US public opinion.

My actions have been attributed to the most perverse motivations, and in the United States where I had hoped they would do me justice, I have also been slandered. And what have I done to deserve this treatment? Could my enemies have desired more? To have become destitute is the product of my own decisions. All of wealth and victorious armies of Colombia have been at my disposal, and my consolation comes from the inner satisfaction of not having caused [Colombia] the slightest harm.<sup>58</sup>

Bolívar's death on the northern coast of the continent that he helped to liberate offered many in the US press an opportunity to reflect upon his character in a more dispassionate manner. Already his tyrannical image had softened somewhat, perhaps because of the efforts of his friends in New York. The traditionally critical *Niles' Weekly Register* reprinted several documents from the *Jamaica Courant* detailing the final days and last testament of the Liberator. It allowed that a reconsideration of Bolívar might be merited,

<sup>56</sup> *United States Gazette*, December 12, 1828.

<sup>57</sup> *United States Gazette*, February 22, 1831.

<sup>58</sup> *Gaceta de Colombia*, December 19, 1830.



but that time would help to render justice.<sup>59</sup> The same paper concluded upon his death “what has shewn itself as most objectionable to us, may have been the result of necessity.” The editors observed that the racially “mixed and ignorant” people of the Latin nations lack the “moral power” of their Anglo counterparts, which might have forced Bolívar to establish a “strong” government. The racism of the editors is worth noting, again attributing the shortcomings of the government to the character of its people.<sup>60</sup>

The pro-British *Albion* envisioned Bolívar to be a persecuted, misunderstood, and slandered hero. Bolívar emerges here as a patriot who gave all that he had to the people of his liberated homeland. If the country had rejected his guidance at a time of its utmost peril, its fate could not be attributed to Bolívar’s lack of sacrifice. The *Albion* relates that the changes in the Liberator’s public image were unjustly caused by slanderous US allies of Bolívar’s enemies.

The hostility on the part of the North American press has reached such depths that his [Bolívar’s] friends have found it almost impossible to maintain a better informed [image]; and it is satisfying to know that people become much less disillusioned before the lamented death of the patriot. We believe now that complete justice will be paid, and that he will be considered, like he deserves, as the Washington of the South.<sup>61</sup>

The *Evening Post* mirrored this lament and assessment. “Bolívar will be ranked as the greatest man, both as a statesman and soldier, who has hitherto appeared in the province of Spanish America, while his title to the reputation of a true and honest patriot, attested as it has been by numerous acts of his life, is now confirmed by his death.” It seeks to revive Bolívar’s republican image, speaking in terms of his refusal to assume absolute power and his “virtuous” “attachment to liberty.”<sup>62</sup>

The New York *Journal of Commerce* echoed these laudatory comments in an article that was reprinted in the *Gaceta de Colombia*. Bolívar’s glory and stature, the editor wrote, were the object of considerable envy, just as had been the virtue of Washington. The Liberator’s enemies, moreover, stooped to an assassination attempt and, failing that, a press campaign to slander his image at home and abroad. The Liberator passed through this

<sup>59</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, July 3, 17, 1830.

<sup>60</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, February 19, 1831.

<sup>61</sup> “Muerte de Bolívar,” *The Albion*, February 19, 1831, trans., in: *Santander y la opinión angloamericana*, p. 316.

<sup>62</sup> *Evening Post*, February 14, 1831.

calumnious crucible only to emerge as “pure gold.” The editors proclaimed boldly that perhaps Bolívar had exceeded the glory of Washington.

If Washington spent the best part of his year winning and consolidating the independence of his country, then so did Bolívar, and even more: with vigor he has struggled from district to district, from conflict to conflict, where even liberty was in danger, being satisfied only with the liberation of the entire continent. And if Washington fought with various deprivations and dangers, sacrificing his comfort for the good of his country, then Bolívar did even more of the same. And if Washington stood ready to help with his private fortune to advance the cause that “proves the spirit of men,” then so did Bolívar, and in this his sacrifices were greater than Washington, because his financial sacrifices had been much greater.<sup>63</sup>

Here we see the near-idolization of the fallen Liberator. A final attack against the critics of Bolívar claims that he died a victim to the persecutions of a set of wicked men from the dregs of society!<sup>64</sup>

The image of a man as complex as Simón Bolívar is necessarily shaped by many forces. Analysts from across the socio-political spectrum can legitimately claim that their beliefs are justified by the “thinking” of the Liberator. In Venezuela, where the “cult of Bolívar” has produced countless images of the Liberator, no consensus has been reached as to Bolívar’s essential character and lasting historical significance. The same is true of other countries where Bolívar is subject to less scrutiny. Though the intensity of the Bolivarian debate is not paralleled in the US press, unanimity is lacking in that arena as well. Editorialists and writers found favor with, or expressed opposition to Bolívar according to the degree to which they interpreted his actions as parallel to their own, or with the ideals that they held dear. In Sweden, for example, liberal versus monarchical ideals polarized the image of Bolívar.<sup>65</sup>

The political ideology of republicanism and the effects of partisan struggles shaped the Liberator’s image in the United States press. The glorious stage of the Independence movement, years full of promise, were interpreted in the hope seen in the future of the United States. The identification of Bolívar with Washington reveals the deeply internalized image of the Americas as an unified experiment in freedom, liberty, and republicanism.

<sup>63</sup> “Consideraciones sobre El Libertador,” *Gaceta de Colombia*, April 10, 1831.

<sup>64</sup> *United States Gazette*, February 24, 1831.

<sup>65</sup> Carlos Vidales, “La muerte de Bolívar en la prensa sueca,” in: *Simón Bolívar, 1783-1983: Imagen y presencia del Libertador en estudios y documentos suecos*, Stockholm, Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Universidad de Estocolmo, Monografía No. 9, 1983, pp. 14, 16-17.

Just as many in the United States tended to ignore institutions such as slavery that contradicted the republican ideal or universal liberty, so too did commentators downplay Bolívar's authoritarian tendencies or the profound cultural differences between Hispanic and Anglo-America. The crisis of 1826 that led Bolívar to assume direct control of the Colombian government alienated many observers in the US, leading them to reappraise their opinions. The two images that had emerged by 1829 bore less resemblance to Bolívar, and more to US political divisions. The post-mortem analysis of the Liberator confirmed previously held beliefs, modified some, but affected little fundamental change upon the image that had been created of Bolívar in life. That life, with its many complications and contradictions, was reflected in all its complexities in the press of the United States.

