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<td>Napoleon invades Iberian peninsula, installs brother Joseph on Spanish throne</td>
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Independence Narratives, Past and Present

The Shot Heard Round the World
Was the Start of the Revolution
The Minutemen were Ready
On the Move.¹

In what seems like the stone age of television, millions of North American schoolchildren once spent their bleary-eyed Saturday mornings watching a variety of public service announcements interspersed with their cartoons. They learned about grammar, math, civics, and science from Schoolhouse Rock, along with a series of lessons about a seminal moment in the national past. The best among those history lessons, the "Shot Heard Round the World," was a delightfully entertaining rendering of Paul Revere’s ride, in which they were told that “we” kicked out the British Redcoats in order to “let freedom reign.” It was a clever work of propaganda, in which independence was narrated not as the birth of the United States (there were, after all, already a “we” and a “British,” and a pre-existing history covered in another Schoolhouse Rock episode called “No More Kings”), but as a moment in which Americans acted out their core values through the violent expulsion of tyrants.

Outsiders might find it difficult to imagine that a series of wars in thirteen distinct colonies could be defined as a single battle for independence through this cartoon. Still, it was possible...
to do this largely because in the aftermath of independence, those colonies created a common government, which in turn successfully promoted the belief that North Americans shared a common national history. That national government also endeavored to promote a vision of independence that held that this war was right and just, that the English colonists living here were more American than European, that they were being oppressed by people with whom they shared few common values, and that having escaped religious persecution in Europe more than a century before, it was their destiny to demand political freedom. There were, of course, silences in this narrative. It ignored the fact that women, indigenous, and African peoples did not gain their freedom, that not all colonists came to the colonies because of religious discrimination, that many atrocities were committed in the name of independence, and that tens of thousands of people who were born in the colonies and no less American than their neighbors lost their property and community standing after the war because they supported the losing side.

Still, what is remarkable about the narrative reproduced in the Schoolhouse Rock cartoons is its capacity to persist as the dominant view of U.S. independence, even after a violent civil war cost over 600,000 lives less than a century later. This power is instructive of the challenge that confronts us when we try to produce a similarly straightforward understanding of independence in the Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonies that lay to the south of the thirteen British colonies that formed the United States of America. What would a Schoolhouse Rock version of Latin American independence look like? Where would it begin? Would it even be possible?

**The Problem of Beginnings**

There was no “shot heard round the world” to signal a struggle for Latin American independence, in part because there was no single war for Latin American independence. Indeed, it is astoundingly difficult to even narrate the history of the French, Spanish, English, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies that comprised this part of the world in a way that sets up independence as the logical or inevitable culmination of a national destiny—a story of freedom or otherwise. Rather, when we look at the histories that preceded and followed independence in this part of the world we are struck by the fundamental challenges that undermine efforts to tell this as one story.

The first problem we confront lies on the national level. Mexicans, Argentines, Brazilians, Chileans, and residents of other societies in the region all have their own national independence narratives, and they often differ a great deal, not just in the military heroes they venerate, but in the underlying values these stories inculcate. Mexicans for instance, revere a liberal priest (Father Miguel Hidalgo). Brazilians claim a slave owning aristocrat (Dom Pedro I). Venezuelans, Colombians, and Peruvians revere a liberal autocrat (Simón Bolívar) as the “Great Liberator,” a reference to the fact that he led the military coalition that ultimately drove the Spanish out of their last footholds in South America. Some Bolivians (whose country is named for the Great Liberator) also celebrate Bolívar, but millions of people in this country instead venerate Túpac Katari, an Ayamara leader who died in a rebellion against the Spanish more than forty years before independence. Their divided loyalties offer entirely different perspectives on where we should begin and end the story of this era.
As the Bolivian case suggests, the type of independence narrative we choose depends upon what sorts of actors we privilege. Told from the perspective of European descended elite males (criollos), independence was often a story of bravery and sacrifice in the name of ideals (national independence, freedom, self-determination). Told from the perspective of elite women it was often a much more ambivalent story of frustrated ambitions (see the story of Manuela Sáenz, Bolívar’s lover and savior, on this account). Indigenous peoples often opposed these local leaders, fearing that self-determination for colonial elites would signal ruin for themselves, as those same colonial elites were their worst exploiters. African descended slaves had similarly complex views, supporting a variety of sides in the conflicts depending on where individual and collective opportunities for emancipation seemed to lie.

These challenges might lead us to abandon both the idea of a common independence narrative and a sense that there can be a common story of Latin America. Yet if we do this we risk losing sight of what seems like a significant fact: between 1790 and 1830 almost every colony in the Americas (excepting Canada, Cuba, and a small number of other colonies in or bordering the Caribbean) violently dispossessed their European rulers. A shared history of colonial rule marked all of these societies, and left common legacies and challenges for most. Moreover, the battles for independence connected societies across the region. News of rebellions in one colony spread to others, as did rebel and imperial armies. The fact that different parts of the region were under the control of different empires also facilitated the process, as rebel leaders could flee from their home to the colony of another European Empire (thus Bolívar’s Letter from Jamaica, excerpted below), and could at times enlist the support of the European enemies of their colonial overlords. This, of course, was possible because during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Europe was consumed by the Napoleonic Wars, leaving the governments of the old world without the wherewithal to fully dominate their colonies (Figure 1.1).

These phenomena leave us with a series of uncomfortable choices. If we choose one independence narrative, we offer the opportunity of imagining a common Latin American past, but silence other, equally valid ways of understanding this history. If we choose too many narratives we might do greater justice to a series of personal and local stories, but we risk losing a larger view of Latin America in the cacophony. My approach to this dilemma is two-fold. Below I will not tell one story of independence, but three. And rather than con-
Considering independence as a series of personages and events that need to be remembered and venerated, the sections that follow focus on the ways that independence is narrated—the morals and messages that are usually invoked through the story of Latin American independence.

Stories of Freedom

On November 4, 1780 in the Andean town of Tinta, Túpac Amaru II (José Gabriel Candorcanqui) seized the local Spanish Governor, Antonio de Arriaga, and ordered that he be put on trial. Executing de Arriaga a week later, he declared a rebellion against the Spanish Empire. His rebellion failed, leading to his death and the deaths of thousands of his compatriots, but the cathartic (or alternately, frightening) power of his rebellion resonates in parts of Latin America to this day.

Colonial Latin Americans lived in unfree and unequal societies, and while most struggled against the injustices they faced only in limited quotidian ways, the region saw its share of spectacularly violent uprisings. Indigenous peoples, locked in a caste system that offered limited rights and made many demands, and slaves, were the most unfree and led the most impressive struggles. The Caste War in the Yucatán in 1712, millenarian revolts in the Andes, and the creation of vast communities of escaped slaves (the largest, Palmares, survived in Brazil from 1605 to 1694) reflected this. At their extreme these movements envisioned a world without Spaniards. They banished Europeans, their languages, and their food in their effort to return to a distant, utopian past. Nonetheless, as they were fighting against colonial states that were much stronger than them, most struggles for freedom in colonial Latin America were ultimately defeated—that is, until Haitian slaves took on the most powerful European nation of the day.

If we narrate independence as a story about freedom, Haiti (St. Domingue) is a good place to begin. During the 1780s St. Domingue accounted for 40 percent of France’s foreign trade, and was arguably the richest colony in Latin America, producing two-fifths of the world’s sugar and half the world’s coffee. A half million slaves lay at the heart of that prosperity, and would also be its undoing. A glimpse of the island in 1791 would reveal hundreds of thousands of recently enslaved Africans, subjects who had been born free and longed for emancipation. One would also see a small but significant number of free people of color (some of whom supported slavery), important economic players on the island who chafed at the fact that even the revolutionary Estates General denied them political rights.

It was in this context that a slave revolt in 1791 metastasized into a civil war, and then a colonial war, leaving the island’s white planters unable to defend their possessions. Slave emancipation came in 1793, when a French appointed governor (Léger-Félicité Sonthonax) used the promise of freedom to build alliances with newly-freed slaves and regain control over the island. Eleven years later, after a decade more of civil strife, occupations by British, French, and Spanish armies, and numerous attempts to re-establish slavery on the island, Haitians won their independence. Theirs was the first republic to ban slavery in the Americas.

Events in St. Domingue had an impact elsewhere. Slave uprisings in the Spanish colonies (e.g. Coro, Venezuela, in 1795) followed news of St. Domingue. Planters around the
Caribbean responded in kind, increasing discipline on their estates and mercilessly punishing even the hint of slave resistance. When war broke out in the Spanish colonies just a few years later, slavery was on many people’s minds. Some slaves, like Juan Izaguirre in the Valle de Onato in Venezuela, appropriated the language of criollo (American born Spaniards) liberators to claim their own freedom. Others opted for loyalty to Spain when this seemed a likelier route to freedom. Slaves defended Buenos Aires against the British Invasion in 1806–7, and supported the royalist forces in large numbers in return for promises of rights and freedoms (commonly the right to be treated as a Spaniard). Not to be outdone, several rebel governments (juntas) outlawed the slave trade and passed (post-dated) free womb laws (Santiago in 1811, Buenos Aires in April 1812, and Lima in 1821). The Venezuelan rebel Francisco Miranda, who was personally opposed to slavery, offered freedom in return for 10 years military service. Bolívar, who followed Miranda as a leading figure in Venezuelan revolutionary circles (and who was a member of the group that arrested Miranda and turned him over to the Spanish), actively recruited slaves beginning in 1816, and would not have succeeded without drawing them away from the royalist cause.

Miranda, Bolívar, and the other rebel leaders who openly opposed slavery have come to be known as Latin America’s early liberals. This term was bandied about constantly during the nineteenth century, used to describe any number of political movements that identified with progress and against tradition. Liberals called for greater freedom, sometimes individual freedom and equality before the law, sometimes the elimination of government imposed trade restrictions, and often an end to the power of the corporate entities that characterized colonial society—the Church, the nobility, and the communal Indian village (the latter because liberals believed that communal land tenure restricted the free circulation of private property and thus limited their nations’ potential for economic growth). Liberalism could thus be used to argue simultaneously for the freedom of urban elites from their colonial masters and for their right to gobble up the property of rural peasants, to in effect enhance their freedom at the expense of other people’s interests.

Other stories of freedom in the region are similarly complex. In Mexico, Father Miguel Hidalgo’s followers responded to his Grito de Dolores by raising a rag-tag army that swept through the Bajío in late 1810. Unlike earlier movements in the Andes, Hidalgo’s armies were multiethnic, composed mainly of people who were already, to a certain extent free, but who, after years of drought and declining wages, viewed wealthy Spaniards (particularly grain merchants) as enemies, and at the very least wanted the king’s intercession in their favor. “Death to Spaniards”—the popular slogan shouted as they marched—did not refer to the king, but his venal surrogates.

More complex still, it appears that beyond economic concerns, many of their grievances were the product of eighteenth-century religious reforms, which undermined their traditional religious practices in an attempt to enforce Catholic orthodoxy. They demanded a return to the colonial system as they had known it in the past, and restoration of the old Spanish King. Freedom then, was invoked to justify many different things. It could speak to a desire to escape human bondage, the demand that the avarice of your social betters be contained, or even be framed as the right worship according to the dictates of one’s ancestors.
Stories of Tradition

Most modern individuals chafe at the idea of corporate privilege. It seems wrong that members of the nobility and clergy should enjoy special privileges, or that rights be apportioned differently based on one’s place of birth. We see those who might defend these privileges as backwards at best, and antidemocratic at worst. We can easily understand villagers in the Mexican Bajío revolting because elites were treating them particularly harshly in the context of a famine (1808–10). It is easy to imagine slaves demanding the right to be free. It makes less sense that indigenous people might in fact support colonial rule, defending a system of corporate privileges that seemed to place them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Nonetheless, this too is an important story of independence.

Indians in colonial Latin America owed service and tribute to the state. They also possessed rights to self-rule, to land, water, timber, and the practice of customary law. Though not always perfectly respected, these rights represented the most powerful currency that most indigenous peoples possessed within colonial society, claims that could be invoked in order to defend individual and community interests against otherwise more powerful outsiders, many of whom were politically connected criollos. A significant number of indigenous rebellions during the colonial period were efforts to preserve and expand these rights—rebellions, in effect, in defense of village autonomy. In fact, the Andean rebellions of 1780 were not invariably tied to demands for freedom or equality. They were often efforts to defend local village rights and ensure that royal officials respected local prerogatives. It was not just military repression that brought peace to the Andes in the aftermath of the 1780 rebellion, but a concerted effort by the Spanish state to deal more effectively with local grievances. In part due to their efforts to forge a new colonial pact of domination, Spanish officials did not see renewed rebellion in this region during the wars for independence. Liberal ideals generally fell on deaf ears here.

Tradition carried a great deal of weight elsewhere in Latin America. Lacking democratic institutions and a history of individual rights, state and society across the region were framed by and made sense of through tradition. Honorable families could trace their propriety back generations. Access to political privilege was decided by lineage. The Catholic Church acted as the social glue, operating schools, hospitals, orphanages, charities, and cemeteries, and dominating social and ecclesiastical life through its calendar. Agents of the Spanish Inquisition policed spiritual life in the colony. If change was in the air—and it was, as more and more Latin Americans read enlightenment thinkers, called themselves liberals, and questioned tradition—the backlash against new ideas was just as strong.

In Mexico, struggles between liberals and traditionalists (conservatives) spawned a decade of civil war and then a compromise at independence. The royalist Agustín de Iturbide turned on his superiors and joined the struggle for independence in 1821 in a bargain that saw the primacy of the Catholic Church and the unity of the nation preserved. In the Andes, the pull of tradition (and a fear of the power of the masses) would keep many on the royalist side until the region was liberated from the outside in the 1820s.

More powerful still was the claim to tradition in the parts of Latin America where slavery remained a dominant mode of economic production. In order to function, slave societies relied on a series of myths about stability, the power and virtue of the planter, and the natural order of things. Cuban elites—their terror stoked by race war in Haiti—never seriously
considered independence in the early nineteenth century. In Brazil, the weight of tradition and the power of aristocracy were critical to the illusion that slavery was anything but an abomination. The Portuguese emperor was a father to the people of Brazil in the same way that the planter was a father to the slave.

This logic explains Brazil’s unusual path to independence. Like other regions in the Americas, Brazil experienced its share of late eighteenth-century rebellions (the most famous led by Tiradentes in 1789), but by a particular turn of fate, these rebellions never became part of a national independence narrative, in which Brazilians freed themselves from oppressive and distant colonial rulers. Instead, the distant colonial state came to Brazil, and indirectly set off a series of events that would ultimately lead to independence. Fleeing the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal, Emperor João VI and 15,000 Portuguese relocated to Rio de Janeiro in 1808. The city quickly became the official center of the Empire, with concomitant increases in trade and investment, and Brazil itself was formally elevated to the status of co-kingdom in 1815. Still, this newfound prestige did not preclude mounting calls for independence from Portugal. Rebellions in Pernambuco and elsewhere repeatedly threatened royal authority during these years.

It is difficult to underestimate the role slavery played in Brazilian independence, even if slavery was rarely discussed and never seriously contested. Free Brazilians understood that their society depended on slavery for its economic well-being. This severely limited the appeal of liberalism in Brazil, as slavery acted to unite Brazilian elites (and many in the middle sectors), and made more authoritarian social systems more appealing. For most Brazilians, independence did not seem inherently logical until 1820, when liberal army officers in Portugal rebelled, formed a Cortes, and called the king home. The liberals in Lisbon then demanded that João bow down before their new constitution and that Brazil bow down before Portugal, and seemed poised to abolish slavery. When, in 1822, the Cortes called Pedro, the king’s son and interim ruler in Brazil home, to further his political education, Pedro balked, declaring Brazil independent on September 7, 1822. A series of military skirmishes followed, but Pedro rapidly established a constitutional monarchy under the banner of the Brazilian Empire. Slavery was saved.

Stories of Nationhood

When did Latin Americans begin to think of themselves as members of national communities, and not as colonial subjects? There are a number of interesting signs from this era. When they rallied behind the flag of rebellion, Mexicans followed the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a markedly local patron saint. Local publishing and literary communities flourished during these years, producing a sense of local specificity through the written word. Across the region intellectuals actively condemned the evils of Spanish colonialism and celebrated incipient national cultures, defining themselves as fundamentally distinct from their colonial overlords. Some even excavated local Indian pasts in order to paradoxically claim an ancient history for themselves that pre-dated the arrival of Europeans, and to argue that the presence of the Spanish crown in the Americas was pernicious, destructive; that they, like their fictive ancestors, were enslaved.

It was not so much that they had no desire to be connected to Europe. Europeans in the
Americas remained powerfully linked to their origins. They returned to Spain or Portugal to be educated. They actively looked for opportunities to marry their daughters to recent arrivals. They followed the fashions and attitudes of the Iberian Peninsula. Nonetheless, by the early nineteenth century criollo elites also increasingly saw themselves as rooted in the Americas. This sentiment—that they were Americans rather than Europeans—was both the product of their long history in the region and of recent developments, most notably a series of political and economic changes that historians have come to call the Bourbon Reforms. After the Bourbon's ascended to the Spanish throne in the early eighteenth century, they gradually implemented a series of new and often unwelcome policies in their American colonies. While local merchants benefited from some of the reforms (such as Bourbon efforts to create more legal avenues for trade), the new royal family collected taxes more aggressively and effectively, increasingly substituted peninsular Spanish officials for local ones, reserved many of the new economic opportunities in the colonies for Spaniards, and disrupted traditional governance in the colonies over time. Criollo grievances erupted into rebellion as early as the 1740s, and steadily mounted through the century.

It is not clear that these grievances were destined to lead to independence. Even if they were increasingly taken by liberal values during this era, criollos remained deeply bound to the mother country. Latin American liberalism was hierarchical, favoring individual equality for males of Spanish descent, but these same liberals rarely imagined that these same rights ought to be extended to the lower castes or women. Moreover, even in the 1810s there was very little of what one might call nationalist sentiment in the region, and certainly little communion between elite criollo liberals and the peasants, Indians, slaves, and castas (individuals of a variety of racial mixtures) who labored in the colonies.

History intervened in this story in the form of a diminutive Frenchman. Napoleon’s invasion of Spain in 1808 threw the Iberian peninsula into turmoil, and had the effect of bringing the distinction between criollo and peninsular Spaniard to the fore in several colonies. Spain did not formally relinquish control of her Latin American colonies, but when Charles IV (the Spanish King) was forced from the throne and replaced by Napoleon’s brother, Joseph, it was unclear to whom power in the colonies devolved. In capital cities across the region local elites clashed with vice-regal authorities, and what seemed like a vacuum at the very top of the state offered disaffected liberals the opportunity to conspire for more power at the very least, and independence at most. When residents of Buenos Aires learned that Iberia was almost entirely under French rule from sailors aboard a British frigate on May 13, 1810, they quickly deposed the Spanish Viceroy and formed a junta, initiating La Plata’s May revolution. Though the junta leaders (among them, Argentine national heroes Cornelio Saavedra, Mariano Moreno, and Manuel Belgrano) declared their loyalty to the authentic Spanish King, they also demanded the right to choose their own Viceroy.

La Plata criollos clearly wanted to promote their own material interests (to trade more directly with England for instance), but their desires were not limited to financial matters. Members of the First Junta already demonstrated an incipient sense of nationhood, which hardened into an unrelenting desire for freedom from Spain through the course of several brutal military campaigns. It was following these battles, and not before (as in the case of the United States) that the rebels made a formal Declaration of Independence from Spain on July 9, 1816. With independence won in the core of the old colony of La Plata, their chief
military leader José de San Martín expanded his battle against Spanish forces across the continent, fighting into the 1820s.

The ease of initial victory was deceptive. As criollo nationalists would quickly discover, there was a profound distance between imagining nations and seeing them come into existence. Elite liberals often shared little more than a desire to be free of the constraints of colonial rule, and turned on one another in internal struggles that resulted in the dissolution of their new nations even as the wars for independence raged around them. Still more complex was their relationship to the popular groups that formed the core of their armies. We lack comprehensive understandings of why poor and marginalized people joined the independence armies, but what we know suggests that their understandings of the struggle and the nations that would come out of it often differed from the views held by elites. Efforts to knit together these disparate passions into unified nations would not yield rapid returns.

The Documents: Bolivarian Dreams

No single figure is more associated with independence in Latin America than Simón Bolívar. His statue can be found in any major city in the region, and his image is iconic to schoolchildren everywhere in Latin America. In part his fame is tied to his exploits, especially his role in leading victorious rebel armies across the Andes. More than this though, Bolívar has had an enduring place in the pantheon of Latin American idols because he matched his military victories with visionary ideals, with a dream that Latin America should stand united and strong against all enemies, that through unity would come strength, prosperity and freedom. Independence in Latin America left many dreams unfulfilled—dreams that in many ways have gone unfulfilled to this day—and the longing that Bolívar articulated has been a reference point for that sense of incompleteness for nearly two centuries.

Below are three examples of this practice. Each evokes the Bolivarian vision in its own particular way. Document 1.1, an excerpt from Bolívar’s Letter from Jamaica, offers us an opportunity to consider the Bolivarian dream on its own terms. Born into an aristocratic family in Caracas, Bolívar was simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged, a person of wealth and status and a second-class citizen next to the peninsulares. For these and other reasons Bolívar was drawn to both liberalism and to intellectual currents that envisioned Latin Americans as distinct from their Spanish rulers. He and his counterparts were Americans. Unsurprisingly then, Bolívar played an active part in the conspiracies that followed the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, leading several campaigns in Venezuela and Colombia, and establishing himself as an important intellectual author of independence through public speeches and his writings (see, for example, his Manifesto of Cartagena, in 1813, and his Address to the Congress of Angostura, in 1819, both on the website). It was during a brief exile in Jamaica that he wrote the letter included here. Shortly afterwards he returned to Caracas, and gradually assumed leadership of the rebel cause.

Over time he refined his vision, which was always a complex combination of liberal republicanism and authoritarian values. Bolívar opposed slavery and proposed the distribution of land to those who fought for independence, but also favored heavy restrictions on suffrage and believed in a strong, almost dictatorial presidency. He attempted to fulfill this vision with the creation of Gran Colombia (modern Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and
Ecuador), over which he became president in September 1821. The country would dissolve even before his death in 1830, and Bolívar himself would die in disgrace, either the victim of his own ambitions or his follower’s failures, depending on who told the tale. Whether or not these contradictions are tied to his enduring appeal, it is clear that his vision of a strong and united Latin America—an effective bulwark against an ascendant United States and imperial Europe—has always had the power to inspire political leaders in the region.

The second document (1.2) is a speech given in 2002 by Guyanese diplomat Odeen Ishmael (b. 1948), interpreting Bolívar’s legacies. Ishmael has had a long career as both a teacher and a diplomat, the latter including an appointment as Ambassador to the United States and Guyanese Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) from 1993 to 2003. He was appointed Guyanese Ambassador to Venezuela in 2003.

His long service at the OAS (he was twice the Chairman of its Permanent Council) might make Ishmael an easy target for critics on the left, who sometimes argue that this organization simply acts as a front for U.S. ambitions in the region. The OAS is based in Washington, DC, and between 1962 and 2009 actively excluded Cuba, in spite of protests from many member states. That said, it is not clear that member states and individuals like Ishmael were willing lackeys of U.S. imperialism so much as that they viewed the OAS as an (admittedly imperfect) forum for hemispheric dialogue. The Permanent Council meets in the Simón Bolívar Room at its Washington headquarters, and visitors pass a statue of Simón Bolívar on their way into the building. Indeed, the OAS’ vision of a united and strong region lays a legitimate claim on his legacy.

The last document in this chapter (1.3) is a speech by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (b. 1954) made in 2004, invoking both Bolívar and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. During the early years of the twenty-first century Chávez has been one of the most polarizing figures in all of Latin America. Elected president of Venezuela in 1998, he actively lays claim to Bolívar’s legacy, calling his movement a Bolivarian revolution. He renamed his country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. His vision of the dream calls for radical internal reforms (an egalitarian social project that distributes wealth to the poor) and an expansive geo-political project that unites Latin America through military and economic alliances such as the Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y El Caribe (Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean—ALBA). The project is complex, fueled by a mix of anti-imperial and socialist sentiments, along with a healthy dose of petro-dollar assistance from Venezuela, and has inspired powerful passions from all parts of the political spectrum. His admirers believe he represents the best hope for a more equitable Latin American future. His detractors call him a tin-pot dictator. His political style, characterized by long, often rambling, speeches, crude references to foreign heads of state, and mesmerizing political theater, likewise arouses intense passions, ranging from devotion to mockery.

Chávez, Ishmael and Bolívar each offer distinct visions for the Latin American future, and each also does it based upon a claim on the past. Indeed, Bolívar inserts himself into the struggles over history of his day as much as Chávez and Ishmael today insert themselves into struggles over the right to claim Bolívar’s legacy. What is particularly interesting in these documents is each person’s desire (including Bolívar’s) to invoke a certain version of the past in order to dictate the future course of events. The subtle turns of phrase and the differing meanings of the struggle dictate significantly different paths.
Document 1.1 Simón Bolívar, the Letter from Jamaica: Kingston, Jamaica, September 6, 1815


My Dear Sir:

With what a feeling of gratitude I read that passage in your letter in which you say to me: “I hope that the success which then followed Spanish arms may now turn in favor of their adversaries, the badly oppressed people of South America.” I take this hope as a prediction, if it is justice that determines man’s contests. Success will crown our efforts, because the destiny of America has been irrevocably decided; the tie that bound her to Spain has been severed. Only a concept maintained that tie and kept the parts of that immense monarchy together. That which formerly bound them now divides them. The hatred that the Peninsula has inspired in us is greater than the ocean between us. It would be easier to have the two continents meet than to reconcile the spirits of the two countries. The habit of obedience; a community of interest, of understanding, of religion; mutual goodwill; a tender regard for the birthplace and good name of our forefathers; in short, all that gave rise to our hopes, came to us from Spain. As a result there was born [the] principle of affinity that seemed eternal, notwithstanding the misbehavior of our rulers which weakened that sympathy, or, rather, that bond enforced by the domination of their rule. At present the contrary attitude persists: we are threatened with the fear of death, dishonor, and every harm; there is nothing we have not suffered at the hands of that unnatural stepmother—Spain. The veil has been torn asunder. We have already seen the light, and it is not our desire to be thrust back into darkness . . .

The role of the inhabitants of the American hemisphere has for centuries been purely passive. Politically they were nonexistent. We are still in a position lower than slavery, and therefore it is more difficult for us to rise to the enjoyment of freedom . . . States are slaves because of either the nature or the misuse of their constitutions; a people is therefore enslaved when the government, by its nature or its vices, infringes on and usurps the rights of the citizen or subject. Applying these principles, we find that America was denied not only its freedom but even an active and effective tyranny. Let me explain. Under absolutism there are no recognized limits to the exercise of governmental powers. The will of the great sultan, khan, bey, and other despotic rulers is the supreme law, carried out more or less arbitrarily by the lesser pashas, khans, and satraps of Turkey and Persia, who have an organized system of oppression in which inferiors participate according to the authority vested in them. To them is entrusted the administration of civil, military, political, religious, and tax matters. But, after all is said and done, the rulers of Isfahan are Persians; the viziers of the Grand Turk are Turks; and the sultans of Tartary are Tartars.

How different is our situation! We have been harassed by a conduct which has not only deprived us of our rights but has kept us in a sort of permanent infancy with regard
to public affairs. If we could at least have managed our domestic affairs and our internal administration, we could have acquainted ourselves with the processes and mechanics of public affairs. We should also have enjoyed a personal consideration, thereby commanding a certain unconscious respect from the people, which is so necessary to preserve amidst revolutions. That is why I say we have even been deprived of an active tyranny, since we have not been permitted to exercise its functions.

Americans today, and perhaps to a greater extent than ever before, who live within the Spanish system occupy a position in society no better than that of serfs destined for labor, or at best they have no more status than that of mere consumers. Yet even this status is surrounded with galling restrictions, such as being forbidden to grow European crops, or to store products which are royal monopolies, or to establish factories of a type the Peninsula itself does not possess. To this add the exclusive trading privileges, even in articles of prime necessity, and the barriers between American provinces, designed to prevent all exchange of trade, traffic, and understanding. In short, do you wish to know what our future held?—simply the cultivation of the fields of indigo, grain, coffee, sugar cane, cacao, and cotton; cattle raising on the broad plains; hunting wild game in the jungles; digging in the earth to mine its gold—but even these limitations could never satisfy the greed of Spain.

So negative was our existence that I can find nothing comparable in any other civilized society, examine as I may the entire history of time and the politics of all nations. Is it not an outrage and a violation of human rights to expect a land so splendidly endowed, so vast, rich, and populous, to remain merely passive?

As I have just explained, we were cut off and, as it were, removed from the world in relation to the science of government and administration of the state. We were never viceroys or governors, save in the rarest of instances; seldom archbishops and bishops; diplomats never; as military men, only subordinates; as nobles, without royal privileges. In brief, we were neither magistrates nor financiers and seldom merchants—all in flagrant contradiction to our institutions.

It is harder, Montesquieu has written, to release a nation from servitude than to enslave a free nation. This truth is proven by the annals of all times, which reveal that most free nations have been put under the yoke, but very few enslaved nations have recovered their liberty. Despite the convictions of history, South Americans have made efforts to obtain liberal, even perfect, institutions, doubtless out of that instinct to aspire to the greatest possible happiness, which, common to all men, is bound to follow in civil societies founded on the principles of justice, liberty, and equality. But are we capable of maintaining in proper balance the difficult charge of a republic? Is it conceivable that a newly emancipated people can soar to the heights of liberty, and, unlike Icarus, neither have its wings melt nor fall into an abyss? Such a marvel is inconceivable and without precedent. There is no reasonable probability to bolster our hopes.

More than anyone, I desire to see America fashioned into the greatest nation in the world, greatest not so much by virtue of her area and wealth as by her freedom and glory. Although I seek perfection for the government of my country, I cannot persuade myself that the New World can, at the moment, be organized as a great republic. Since it is impossible, I dare not desire it; yet much less do I desire to have all America a monarchy because this plan is not only impracticable but also impossible. Wrongs now
existing could not be righted, and our emancipation would be fruitless. The American states need the care of paternal governments to heal the sores and wounds of despotism and war . . .

From the foregoing, we can draw these conclusions: The American provinces are fighting for their freedom, and they will ultimately succeed. Some provinces as a matter of course will form federal and some central republics; the larger areas will inevitably establish monarchies, some of which will fare so badly that they will disintegrate in either present or future revolutions. To consolidate a great monarchy will be no easy task, but it will be utterly impossible to consolidate a great republic.

When success is not assured, when the state is weak, and when results are distantly seen, all men hesitate; opinion is divided, passions rage, and the enemy fans these passions in order to win an easy victory because of them. As soon as we are strong and under the guidance of a liberal nation which will lend us her protection, we will achieve accord in cultivating the virtues and talents that lead to glory. Then will we march majestically toward that great prosperity for which South America is destined.

I am, Sir, etc., etc.

Simón Bolívar

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Document 1.2 Ambassador Odeen Ishmael, “Influencing the Democratic Process in the Americas: A Tribute to Simón Bolívar”


Mr. Chairman, Secretary General, Assistant Secretary General, Ambassadors, Members of Delegations, Ladies and Gentlemen . . .

Today we honor the memory of the Liberator, the great Venezuelan and South American patriot, Simón Bolívar. Much has been written and said about this great citizen of the Americas over the years, and I believe that what I am stating is already well known. In paying this tribute to Simón Bolívar, I want to touch on two main areas. I will review the influence of the Caribbean region on the career of this legendary leader who led the independence struggles of the peoples of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, and whose military exploits influenced those who aspired for independence in other lands on the South American continent in the early nineteenth century. After this, I will examine, in the light of the Bolivarian experience, some current issues as they affect the growth of economic and political unity and democracy in this hemisphere.

By the time he was 25 years old, Simón Bolívar had traveled extensively in Italy and France. During this period, he studied the philosophies of Rousseau, Locke, and Voltaire and was particularly impressed with the military achievements of Napoleon I. On his way home to South America, he took the opportunity to visit some areas of the United States, which had won its independence from Great Britain just more than two decades before. He had also followed the victorious independence struggle of the Haitian people, and by the time he arrived back in Venezuela, he was convinced that the time
had arrived for the territories ruled by Spain in the Americas to become independent. He had also decided to take the leadership in the independence struggle that he knew had to be waged against Spanish domination.

That was to come around 1810, when as a 27-year-old military officer, he inspired uprisings against Spanish rule. He led his loyal forces in spectacular military victories, and soon the battle cry for independence resounded from the flat llanos of eastern Venezuela and down the Andean backbone of South America.

But there were early setbacks. In 1814, the Spanish forces recaptured Caracas and the revolutionaries were in disarray. Bolívar escaped to Jamaica, and during his sojourn in Kingston, he wrote his famous Letter from Jamaica on September 6, 1815. In this profound political document he advocated a system of republican government throughout Spanish America with checks and balances modeled after the British system of government.

In the Letter from Jamaica, Bolivar did not confine his view of freedom to a continent free of colonialism and the imperialist oppressions. He outlined the main problems of the Latin American people and predicted how the nations he would liberate could move toward the ambitious aim of freedom and order, along with prosperity and peace for everyone.

He also expressed belief in a united and flourishing hemisphere, with opportunity for everyone to progress and to participate in national development. His call for the unity of the Spanish American nations went beyond formulas or political systems. Actually, he declared that it was not possible for the people to develop a perfect and complete form of government; as a result, he advocated reaching a compromise on a system of government to prevent any form of tyranny. He stated: "Do not adopt the best system of government, but the one that is most likely to succeed."

Departing from Jamaica in 1815, Bolívar went to the southern city of Cayes, Haiti, where he and his companions were well received by the people of the first Black independent nation of the Americas. He later traveled to the capital, Port-au-Prince, where he met with President Alexandre Pétion, who was well aware of Bolívar’s cause and he offered him total support. It was Pétion who first called him “the author for independence in South America.”

In the city of Cayes, Bolivar received a supply of weapons and ammunition and was granted permission by the Haitian Government to enlist Haitian volunteers who wanted to join in the struggle against Spanish rule in South America. The only condition President Petion requested in providing assistance was for Bolivar to free the slaves in all the countries that he would set free from Spanish domination.

In early 1816, with the backing of the Republic of Haiti which supported him with men and weapons, Bolivar launched an invasion on the Venezuelan coast. After making some military inroads, he immediately put his pledge to Pétion into action and began by liberating his own African slaves on a plantation he owned. However when he proclaimed general freedom for all slaves, all slave-owners, and even some of his own military commanders, turned against him. He was forced to escape again to Haiti, and spent six months in the south-eastern city of Jacmel. In 1817, he returned to South America, and after many struggles and fierce battles, he and his army made up in part of Haitian freedom fighters, defeated the Spanish Imperial army in Colombia and won that country’s independence in 1819.
Bolívar’s army also included many British and Irish mercenaries who were veterans of the Napoleonic wars. With respect to this, a further Caribbean connection must be noted. These British and Irish recruits occasionally used Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, as their staging post for organizing their supplies. From there, they arranged with Guyanese boat owners to transport them up the Orinoco River where they joined up with the army of llaneros led by the José Antonio Páez, Bolívar’s able commander in the east. It was not unusual for some Guyanese at that period to team up with the British and Irish recruits and join the independence forces in the Orinoco province.

As President of Venezuela and Gran Colombia, Bolívar in 1826 expanded his vision of a united Spanish America by convening representatives of the new South American and Central American republics at the Congress of Panama. Although little was accomplished, it marked the beginning of Pan-Americanism. That Congress drafted the Treaty of Perpetual Union, League and Confederation, which was signed by the delegates but ratified later only by Gran Colombia (which today comprises Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela).

As we have seen, Bolívar overthrew the rule of the Spanish monarchy in South America and oversaw the formation of a number of new Republics. In the English-speaking Caribbean region, the struggle for independence was more evolutionary in nature. However, from time to time the British colonial masters put down with bullets, police suppression, and imprisonment, a number of efforts by political independence movements which agitated for more freedom and for improved rights for the people. Despite the evolutionary nature of the Caribbean independence struggle, the process was nevertheless influenced by the ideals, heroism, courage, and sacrifice of history’s freedom fighters, including Simón Bolívar himself.

Bolívar’s vision of a united American continent, even though it has dimmed from time to time, continues to be gradually illuminated more brightly today. The Congress of Panama planted the seed which was to later germinate into the Organization of American States. This body expanded particularly from the period after the decade of the 1970s with the entry of English-speaking Caribbean nations, and its influence is touching the lives of all peoples in all corners of this hemisphere.

We now see steady progress toward the formation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, which will be the start of a firm economic union of all the countries of the Americas. As the peoples of the Americas draw fundamental benefits from this economic union, they will demand more closeness, and I predict that before the next decade the leaders of regions of the hemisphere will be seriously planning regional political unions. It is easy to predict that not too long after, the political leadership of the various regions will surely begin talking seriously about what can be termed the Union of the Americas.

But the expansion of hemispheric unity, economic or political, can only come about with expanding democracy. Our leaders and our peoples realize this fact, and that is why the leaders of the Americas established a mandate on democracy which resulted in the development of an Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Democracy has to be enriched based on the experience of our history. Today we talk about expanding democracy. Democracy itself, as a pattern of government and a system of belief, has been going through an evolution ever since the idea emerged out of Greek political economy and culture nearly three thousand years ago. In this
hemisphere, we have reached a stage when we now boast of achieving representative
democracy, as expressed in the OAS Charter of 1948. It is now necessary for our elected
representatives to move representative democracy a number of steps further to make it
more qualitative. They must apply consultative and participatory democracy by
involving minorities and women in the process. In so doing a purer form of democracy
will further evolve. We must remind ourselves that everything is always changing.
This doctrine that everything is in a state of change was debated even as far back as
during the era of the classical Greek philosophers. The process of change will have its
pitfalls, and there will be times when it may be necessary for us to take one step forward
and two steps backward. Plato summed up this doctrine very clearly when he wrote:
“You cannot step twice into the same river; the fresh waters are ever flowing in upon
you.”

Today, despite the onward march of democracy in this hemisphere, it is still seriously
challenged by forces that do not respect free elections, and others that promote violent
crime and terrorism.

We must stress that the responsibility for maintaining democracy rests not only with
the Governments, but with the opposition parties and civil society as well. While we
agree that Governments have a greater responsibility, they cannot alone guarantee
democracy, particularly if opposition political parties make unfair demands and do not
want to dialogue in order to reach a compromise.

Despite the limitations of elections, there should never be attempts to discard
elections and try to arrive at Governments by non-constitutional means. Such attempts
are very dangerous and destabilizing. Our citizens must defend democracy, but to do
so our societies have to develop a democratic culture to allow democracy to grow, and
for citizens to want to defend it.

Furthermore, we cannot have sustained democracy if we do not tackle the problem
of poverty. How long can the poor people of our hemisphere continue to listen to our
political leaders and international policy-makers debating countless suggested pro-
posals to ease poverty? We must be reminded that when people have a perception that
action is of slow, they will want to carry out their own actions, which can lead to
destabilization and changes in the pattern of democratic development. Shakespeare
summed of the feeling of the poor when in his historical play, Henry IV, Part II, one of
his characters, addressing the Chief Justice, declared, “I am as poor as Job, my lord,
but not as patient.”

At the same time, the multilateral financial institutions have a moral duty also to pro-
tect democratic governments. They must also have a democratic charter and mandate.

Many poor countries became heavily indebted because the multilateral financial
institutions (MFIs) granted large loans years ago to the then despotic regimes which
had no interest in promoting democracy. In reality, the MFIs propped up these non-
democratic regimes which, after periods of long struggle by democratic forces, were
replaced by democratic governments. Today, these democratic governments are being
pressured to repay the heavy debt. Those which are negotiating debt relief are also
constrained because of the unreasonable conditionalities by the MFIs, conditionalities
which put pressures on their economic and social programs. By not being able to deliver
quick development for the benefit of their people, the entire fabric of democracy
becomes threatened, because impatient people may turn against the very democratic
governments which sympathize with their problems. Thus, we are left to wonder if the
MFIs are really fulfilling their mandates because their slow process concerning debt
relief for poor countries is not really helping to bring quick relief to those fledgling
democracies.

As we commemorate the life and achievements of Simón Bolívar, we also have to
reflect on the high regard in which he is held, not only in Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia,
and Ecuador, but also in other countries of the hemisphere. The times of Bolívar were
much different from today, but what remains common from those days to this day is the
underlying problem of poverty. Countries of the Americas won political independence
in different ways, but winning economic independence still poses a challenge. Due to
historical circumstances of his day, Bolívar had to utilize the military option to win
independence. In gaining the desired objective for a large part of South America, he
brought a sense of dignity and pride to the peoples of those lands. By chasing away
the colonial oppressor, he set the stage for the generations that succeeded him to
organize and develop a popular system of government to protect their political inde-
pendence and improve the conditions of life for all. It is a challenge that still confronts
the Americas.

And so today we express words of admiration for Simón Bolívar. Even though we
may not agree with all the political methods he applied, he deserves glory for being a
visionary and for taking the decisive giant step to win and influence political indepen-
dence for so many nations in South America. I paraphrase Shakespeare, who in his play,
Much Ado About Nothing, wrote the following words which fit the qualities of Simón
Bolívar most aptly: “He has borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing . . . the
feats of a lion.”

Document 1.3  Speech by President Hugo Chávez at the opening of XII G-15
Summit, Monday, March 1, 2004

. . . Ladies and Gentlemen.

Welcome to this land washed by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean
Sea, crossed by the magnificent Orinoco River. A land crowned by the perpetual snow
of the Andean mountains. . .!

A land overwhelmed by the never-ending magic of the Amazon forest and its
millenary chants. . .!

Welcome to Venezuela, the land where a patriotic people has again taken over the
banners of Simón Bolívar, its Liberator, whose name is well known beyond these
frontiers!

As Pablo Neruda said in his “Chant to Bolívar”:
Our Father thou art in Heaven,
in water, in air
in all our silent and broad latitude
everything bears your name, Father in our dwelling:
your name raises sweetness in sugar cane
Bolivar tin has a Bolivar gleam
the Bolivar bird flies over the Bolivar volcano
the potato, the saltpeter, the special shadows,
the brooks, the phosphorous stone veins
everything comes from your extinguished life
your legacy was rivers, plains, bell towers
your legacy is our daily bread, oh Father.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen: Bolivar, another “Quixote but not mad” (as Napoleon Bonaparte had already called Francisco de Miranda, the universal man from Caracas), who on this very same South American soil tried to unite the emerging republics into a single, strong and free republic.

In his letter from Jamaica in 1815, Bolivar spoke of convening an Amphictyonic Congress in the Isthmus of Panama:

“I wish one day we would have the opportunity to install there an august congress with the representatives of the Republics, Kingdoms and Empires to debate and discuss the highest interests of Peace and War with the countries of the other three parts of the world.”

Bolivar reveals himself as an anti-imperialist leader, sharing the same ideals that materialized in the Bandung Conference in April 1955, 140 years after that insightful letter from Kingston. Inspired by Nehru, Tito, and Nasser, a group of important leaders gathered at this conference to confront their great challenges, and expressed their desire to not be involved in the East-West Conflict, but rather to work together toward national development. This was the first key milestone: It was the first Afro-Asian conference, the immediate precedent of the Non-Aligned Countries, which gathered 29 Heads of State and gave birth to the “Conscience of the South.”

Two events of great political significance occurred in the 60’s: the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961 and the Group of the 77 in 1964: Two milestones and a clear historic trend: the need of the South to be self-aware and to act in concert in a world characterized by imbalance and unequal exchange.

In the 70’s a proposal from the IV Summit of Heads of State of the Non-Aligned Countries in Algiers in 1973 becomes important: the need to create a new international economic order. In 1974 the UN Assembly ratified this proposal, and while it remains in effect to this day, it has ended up becoming a mere historical footnote.

Two events that were very important for the struggles in the South occurred during the 80’s: the creation of the Commission of the South in Kuala Lumpur in 1987 under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, the unforgettable fighter of Tanzania and the world.

Two years later, in September 1989, the Group of the 15 is created out of a meeting of the Non-Aligned Countries, with the purpose of strengthening South-South cooperation.

In 1990, the South-Commission submitted its strategic proposal: “A Challenge for the South.” And later on . . . later on came the flood that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union. As Joseph Stiglitz said, this brought unipolarity and the arrival of the “happy 90’s.”
All those struggles, ideas and proposals sank in the neo-liberal flood. The world experienced the so-called “end of History,” accompanied by the triumphant chant of (those who advocated) neo-liberal globalization, which today, besides being an objective reality, is a weapon they use to manipulate us into passivity in the face of an economic world order that excludes our countries of the South and condemns us to perpetually play the role of producers of wealth and recipients of leftovers.

Never before had the world such tremendous scientific-technical potential, such a capacity to generate wealth and well-being. Authentic technological wonders that have eliminated the distances between places. Still, (these innovations) have helped only a very few people, the 15% of the global population that lives in the countries of the North.

Globalization has not brought so-called interdependence, but an increase in dependency. Instead of wealth being globalized, it is poverty that is increasingly widespread. We have not seen general or shared development. Instead, the abyss between the North and South is so enormous that it is obviously unsustainable—those who try and justify their opulence and waste are simply blind.

The faces of the neo-liberal world economic order are not only the Internet, virtual reality, or the exploration of outer-space, but they can also be seen—and more dramatically—in the countries of the South, where 790 million people are starving, where 800 million adults are illiterate, and where 654 million human beings alive today will not grow older than 40 years of age. This is the harsh and hard face of a world economic order dominated by neo-liberalism, and it is seen every year in the South, where every year 11 million boys and girls below 5 years of age die as a result of illnesses that are practically always preventable and curable. They die at the appalling rate of over 30 thousand every day, 21 every minute, 10 each 30 seconds. In the South, the proportion of children suffering from malnutrition reaches 50 percent in quite a few countries, while according to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), a child who lives in the First World will consume the equivalent of what 50 children consume in an underdeveloped country during his or her lifetime.

The great hope that a globalization based in solidarity and true cooperation would bring scientific-technical wonders to all people in the world has been reduced to this grotesque caricature, full of exploitation and social injustice, by the Neo-liberal model. Our countries of the South were told a thousand times that the only and true “science” capable of ensuring development and well-being for everybody dictated that we let the markets operate without regulation, privatize everything, create the conditions for transnational capital investment, and ban the State from intervening the economy. Almost the magical and wonderful philosopher’s stone!!

Neo-liberal thought and politics were created in the North to serve their interests, but it should be highlighted that they have never been truly applied there. They have instead been spread throughout the South in the past two decades and have now come to become the only acceptable way of thinking, with disastrous results.

As a result of the application of (neo-liberal) thinking, the world economy as a whole has grown less than in the three decades between 1945 and 1975, when the Keynesian theories, which promoted market regulation through State intervention, were applied. The gap separating the North and the South continued to grow, not only in terms of
economic indicators, but also with regards to access to knowledge, the strategic sector that creates the fundamental possibility of integral development in our times.

With only 15 percent of the world population, the countries of the North count over 85 percent of Internet users and control 97 percent of the patents. These countries have an average of over 10 years of schooling, while in the countries of the South schooling barely reaches 3.7 years and in many countries it is even lower. The tragedy of underdevelopment and poverty in Africa, with its historic roots in colonialism and the enslavement of millions of its children, is now reinforced by neo-liberalism imposed from the North. In this region, the rate of infant mortality in children under 1 year of age is 107 per each thousand children born alive, while in developed countries this rate is 6 per each thousand children born alive. Also, life expectancy is 48 years, thirty years less than in the countries of the North.

In Asia, economic growth in some countries has been remarkable, but the region as a whole is still lagging behind the North in basic economic and social development indicators.

We are, dear friends, in Latin America, the favorite testing-ground of the neo-liberal model in the recent decades. Here, neo-liberalism reached the status of a dogma and was applied with greatest severity. Its catastrophic results can be easily seen, and explain the growing and uncontrollable social protests unleashed by the poor and excluded people of Latin America for some years now, and which every day grow stronger. They claim their right to life, to education, to health, to culture, to a decent living as human beings.

Dear friends:

I witnessed this with my own eyes, on a day like today but exactly 15 years ago, the 27th of February 1989, an intense day of protest that erupted on the streets of Caracas against the neo-liberal reforms of the International Monetary Fund and ended in a very real massacre known as “The Caracazo.”

The neoliberal model promised Latin Americans greater economic growth, but during the neo-liberal years growth has not even reached half the rate achieved in the 1945–1975 period under different policies.

The model recommended the most strict financial and trade liberalization in order to achieve a greater influx of foreign capital and greater stability. But during the neo-liberal years the financial crises have been more intense and frequent than ever before. The external regional debt was non-existent at the end of the Second World War, and today amounts to 750 billion dollars, the per capita highest debt in the world and in several countries equal to more than half the GDP. Between 1990 and the year 2002 alone, Latin America made external debt payments amounting to 1 trillion 528 billion dollars, which is twice the amount of the current debt and represented an annual average payment of 118 billion. That is, we pay the debt every 6.3 years, but this evil burden continues to be there, unchanging and inextinguishable.

¡¡It is a never-ending debt!!

Obviously, this debt has exceeded the normal and reasonable payment commitments of any debtor and has turned into an instrument to undercapitalize our countries. It has additionally forced the imposition of socially adverse measures that in turn politically destabilize those governments that implement them.
We were asked to be ultraliberal, to lift all trade barriers to imports coming from the North, but those oral champions of trade have in practice been champions of protectionism. The North spends 1 billion dollars per day practicing what it has banned us from doing, that is, subsidizing inefficient products. I want to tell you—and this is true and verifiable—that each cow grazing in the European Union receives in its four stomachs 2.20 dollars a day in subsidies, thus having a better situation than the 2.5 billion poor people in the South who barely survive on incomes of less than 2 dollars a day.

With the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), the government of the United States wants us to reduce our tariffs to zero for their benefit and wants us to give away our markets, our oil, our water resources and biodiversity, in addition to our sovereignty, whereas walls of subsidies for agriculture keep access closed to that country’s market. It seems a peculiar way to reduce the huge commercial deficit of the United States; to do exactly the opposite of what they claims is a sacred principle in economic policy.

Neo-liberalism promised Latin Americans that if they accepted the demands of multinational capital, investments would flood the region. Indeed, the in-flow of capital increased. Some portion (came) to buy state-owned companies, sometimes at bargain prices, another portion was speculative capital that seized opportunities arising from financial liberalization.

The neo-liberal model promised that after the painful adjustment period, which was necessary to deprive the State of its regulatory power over the economy and liberalize trade and finance, wealth would spread across Latin America and the region’s long history of poverty and underdevelopment would be left in the past. But the painful and temporary adjustment became permanent and appears to be becoming everlasting. The results cannot be concealed.

If we look at 1980, the year we conventionally denote as the start of the neo-liberal cycle, we see that at that time around 35 percent of Latin Americans were poor. Two decades later, 44 percent of Latin American men and women are poor. Poverty is particularly cruel to children. It is a sad reality that in Latin America most of the poor people are children and most children are poor. In the late 90’s, the Economic Commission for Latin America reported that 58 percent of children under 5 were poor, along with 57 percent of children between 6 and 12. Poverty among children and teenagers tends to reinforce and perpetuate unequal access to education, as was shown by a 15 country survey conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank. Among households in the 10 percent of the population with the highest income average schooling was 11 years, whereas among households in the bottom 30 percent of income the average was 4 years.

Neo-liberalism promised wealth. And poverty has spread, thus making Latin America the most unequal region in the world in terms of income distribution. The wealthiest 10 percent of the population in the region—those who are satisfied with neo-liberalism and feel enthusiastic about the FTAA—receive nearly 50 percent of the total income, while the poorest 10 percent—those who never appear in the society pages of the oligarchic mass media—barely receive 1.5 percent of total income.

This model based on exploitation has turned Latin America and the Caribbean into a social time-bomb; ready to explode, should anti-development, unemployment and poverty keep increasing.
Even though the social struggles are growing sharp and even some governments have been overthrown in uprisings, we are told by the North that neo-liberal reforms have not yielded good results because they have not been implemented in full. So, they now intend to recommend a formula for suicide. But we know, brothers and sisters, that countries do not commit suicide. The people of our countries will awaken, stand up and fight!

As a conclusion, Your Excellencies, (I say that) because of its injustice and inequality, the economic and social order of neo-liberal globalization appears to be a dead-end street for the South.

Therefore, the Heads of State and governments who are responsible for the well being of our peoples cannot passively accept the exclusionary rules imposed by this economic and social order.

The history of our countries tells us that without doubt, passivity and grieving are useless. Instead, the only conduct that will enable the South to raise itself from its miserable role as backwards, exploited, and humiliated is concerted and firm action.

Thanks to the heroic struggle against colonialism, the developing countries destroyed an economic and social order that condemned them to the status of exploited colonies. Colonialism was not defeated by the accumulation of tears of sorrow, or by the repentance of colonialists, but by centuries of heroic battles for independence and sovereignty in which the resistance, tenacity and sacrifices of our peoples worked wonders.

Here in South America, we commemorate this very year the 180th anniversary of the Battle of Ayacucho, where people united in a liberating army after almost 20 years of revolutionary wars under the inspired leadership of José de San Martín, Bernardo O’Higgins, José Inacio de Abreu e Lima, Simón Bolívar and Antonio José de Sucre, expelling a Spanish empire that had hitherto extended from the warm beaches of the Caribbean to the cold lands of Patagonia, and thus ending 300 years of colonialism.

Today, in the face of the obvious failure of neo-liberalism and the great threat that the international economic order represents for our countries, it is necessary to reclaim the Spirit of the South.

That is where this Summit in Caracas is heading.

I propose to re-launch the G-15 as a South Integration Movement rather than a group. A movement for the promotion of all possible trends, to work with the Non-aligned Movement, the Group of 77, China...The entire South!!

I propose that we reiterate the proposals of the 1990 South Commission:

Why not focus our attention and political actions to the proposal that we offer several thousand “Grants of the South” per year to students from under-developed countries so that they can continue their studies in the South; or (the proposal that we) dramatically increase our cooperation in health in order to decrease infant mortality, provide basic medical care, fight AIDS?

We must develop these and many other programs with solidarity in order to ease the deep suffering that characterizes the South, and confront the costly and ineffective results of our dependence on the North.

Why not create the Debtor’s Fund as an elemental defense tool? It could have consultations and coordinate collective action policies to confront the ways creditor’s forum protect their interests.
Why not transform our symbolic system of trade preferences among developing countries into something more advanced, that can counteract the protectionism of the North, which excludes our countries from their markets?

Why not promote trade and investment flows within the South instead of competing in a suicidal fashion to offer concessions to the multinationals of the North?

Why not establish the University of the South?

Why not create the Bank of the South?

These and other proposals will retain their value. They await our political will to turn them into reality.

But finally, dear friends, I would like to mention a particular proposal, which, in my opinion, has great significance:

In the South we are victims of the media monopoly of the North, which acts as a power system that disseminates in our countries and plants in the minds of our citizens information, values and consumption patterns that are basically alien to our realities and that have become the most powerful and effective tools of domination. Never is domination more perfect than when the dominated people think like the dominators do.

To face and begin to change this reality, I dare to propose the creation of a TV channel that could be seen throughout the world, showing information and pictures from the South. This would be the first and fundamental step in crushing the media monopoly.

In a very short time this TV channel of the South could broadcast our values and our roots throughout the world. It could tell the people in the world, in the words of the great poet Mario Benedetti, a man from the deep South, Uruguay, where the La Plata River opens so much that it looks like a silver sea, and washes my dear Buenos Aires and bluish Montevideo:

“The South Also Exists”

With its French horn
and its Swedish academy
its American sauce
and its English wrenches
with all its missiles
and its encyclopedias
its star wars
and its opulent viciousness
with all its laurels
the North commands,

but down here, down
close to the roots
is where memory
no memory omits
and there are those
who defy death for
and die for
and thus together achieve
what was impossible
that the whole world
would know
that the South,
that the South also exists

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much

For Further Reading


