In a recent commentary on the Liberator’s continuing influence, Larry Rohter (Montreal Gazette, August 8, 2000) asked a simple yet complex question, “Which Bolivar?” “There is one Bolivar, for instance, who praised democracy as ‘the most sacred source’ of power, but there is also another who once proclaimed that ‘necessity recognizes no laws.’ One Bolivar admired George Washington as the ideal ‘citizen-hero’ who ‘fills my bosom with emulation,’ while another famously and bitterly remarked that ‘the United States seems destined by providence to plague Latin America with misery in the name of liberty.’ [Venezuelan President] Chavez describes himself as a disciple of Bolívar, and some of his more ardent followers have gone so far as to suggest he is the ‘reincarnation of the Liberator.’ But his vision of Bolivar is one ‘very much adapted to his own purposes,’ said Jesus Sanoja Hernández, a prominent political commentator here.”

Guillermo Morón, a leading Venezuelan historian, pointed up the same contradiction. The Bolivar that Chavez “likes is the one who centralized power,” said Morón. “The Bolivar that the opposition likes, in contrast, is the one who respected the law, consulted even his enemies and tried to create an impartial system of justice for all.” At different points in his eventful life, Bolívar did indeed act in contradictory, sometimes destructive ways, but he remained ever mindful of his quest for glory.

In 1983 UNESCO published a volume that included “Bolivar’s Proclamation to the Soldiers of the United Army of Liberation in Pasco on July 29, 1824.” He delivered the speech a few days before the decisive battles of Junín and Ayacucho. Bolivar exhorted his men:

Soldiers! You are about to complete the greatest task that Heaven has entrusted to men, the task of liberating an entire world from slavery.

Soldiers! The enemies you have to destroy boast of their fourteen years of triumphs; they will, therefore, be well placed to match their weapons against your own, which have excelled in a thousand battles.

Soldiers! Peru and the whole of America place in you their hopes for peace, the daughter of victory. Liberal Europe, too, is watching you, spellbound, since the freedom of the New World is the hope of the Universe. Would you dash such hopes? No, no, no!

Bolivar’s words and deeds serve as powerful reminders that one determined individual, even one with serious flaws of character and temperament, can dramatically shape the course of human history.
Highlights of Simón Bolívar’s Life and Times

1750 Francisco de Miranda born in Caracas.
1773 December 1, Simón’s father, Juan Vicente de Bolívar y Ponte, marries his mother, Concepción Palacios y Blanco.
1778 José de San Martín born in Argentina.
1783 July 24, Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad de Bolívar y Palacios born in Caracas, Venezuela.
1786 January 19, Bolívar’s father dies.
1789 French Revolution.
1792 July 6, Bolívar’s mother dies.
1795 Runs away from his guardian, Don Carlos Palacios. Tutored by Simón Rodriguez.
1797–78 Tutored by Andrés Bello.
1798 July 4, commissioned as a second lieutenant in the cadet corps of the Militia of Aragua.
1799 January 19, departs for Spain to complete his education, learning much from the Marquis de Ustáriz. Writes his first letter from Vera Cruz. George Washington dies.
1802 February, sees and admires Napoleon Bonaparte in Paris. May 26, marries María Teresa Rodríguez del Toro, his cousin; they return to Venezuela.
1803 January 22, María Teresa dies; Bolívar pledges never to marry again.
1804 Returns to Europe; in Paris he enjoys the elite social circle of Fanny Du Villars. Again meets his tutor Simón Rodríguez and travels with him. December 2, witnesses the coronation of Napoleon.
1805 August 15, climbs Monte Sacro (Aventine Hill) in Rome and vows to liberate his homeland. December 27, initiated as a mason of the Scottish rite in Paris.
1806 Miranda’s invasions of Venezuela fail.
1808 February, Napoleon Bonaparte invades Spain; Charles IV abdicates the throne; Napoleon’s brother Joseph Bonaparte is crowned king of Spain, deposing Ferdinand VII.
1809 July 28, appointed chief justice of Yare.
1810 April 19, Spanish captain general of Venezuela is ejected from power by criollo elites who swear allegiance to Ferdinand. June 10, Bolivar travels to London as an envoy to seek support for Venezuela’s revolt against Bonaparte’s authority. Bolivar also meets with Francisco de Miranda and convinces him to return to Venezuela, where they both arrive in December.
1811 July 4, Bolivar addresses the Patriotic Society. July 5, congress declares Venezuelan independence. In the ensuing civil war, Bolivar serves under Miranda. First Republic, or Patria Boba.
1812 March 26, massive earthquakes strike Venezuela, killing perhaps 20,000 people. July 6, loses the important seaport Puerto Cabello to the Royalists. July 24, Miranda surrenders to Monteverde. December 15, writes the Cartagena Manifesto.
1813 May 14, begins “Admirable Campaign” of military victories, which ends with his entry to Caracas on August 6. June 18, declares war to the death against Spaniards and Canary Islanders. August 7, named “Liberator” after victories in Mérida and Caracas. Second Republic established.
1814 Second Venezuelan Republic collapses under attack by Juan Boves. Bolivar flees to New Granada, hoping to rebuild an army to liberate Venezuela.
1815 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo. Ferdinand VII returns to the Spanish throne. Pablo Morillo and Spanish troops reconquer Caracas. September 6, issues the “Jamaica Letter” from exile. December 24, lands in Haiti.
1816 Third Republic. March 31, launches the Los Cayos Expedition from Haiti. Invades at Barcelona, with arms and support from Haiti’s President Petion.
1817 Manuel Piar and Bolivar drive Royalists from Angostura. October 16, Piar executed.
1818 January 30, meets for the first time José Antonio Páez, llanos caudillo. Continued fighting. Establishes official organ, Correo de Orinoco.
February 15, opens second Congress at Angostura. Crosses the Andes and on August 7 defeats Royalists at Boyacá, liberating Colombia. December 17, creates the Republic of Colombia, with three departments, Cundinamarca, Quito, and Venezuela.

27 November, signs armistice with Royalist Gen. Pablo Morillo. Renewed fighting after broken armistice; June 24, defeats Royalists at Carabobo, liberating Venezuela. President of the new republic of Gran Colombia.

April 7, defeats Royalists at Bomboná; May 24, Sucre defeats Royalists at Pichincha, securing independence of Ecuador. United States recognizes the Republic of Colombia. June 16, takes Manuela Sáenz as his lover. July 13, incorporates Guayaquil into Colombia. July 27, meets privately with José de San Martín in Guayaquil.

August, sails for Peru to prosecute the southern campaign. December, U.S. President James Monroe issues his doctrine.

Bolívar becomes increasingly ill. August 6, defeats Royalists at Junín. December 9, Sucre defeats Royalists at Ayacucho, ending Spanish resistance in South America.

Attempts to consolidate political and other institutions in Peru and Colombia. Growing conflict with José Antonio Páez over control of Venezuela. Great Britain recognizes newly independent Spanish American republics.

June 22, meeting of representatives to the Congress of Panama, called by Bolívar. Separatist rebellions led by Páez and others challenge Bolívar rule. November 30, proclaimed president-for-life of Peru.

Páez temporarily submits to Bolívar's authority; Bolívar experiences growing conflict with Pablo de Santander in Colombia. July 5, visits then leaves his native city of Caracas for the last time.

Following failure of the Convention of Ocaña, on June 24, assumes dictatorial powers in Colombia. September 25, another failed assassination attempt, foiled by Manuela Sáenz.

Páez separates Venezuela from Gran Colombia.

Continued political conflict and secession movements. May 8, leaves Bogotá, ill and planning exile. June 4, Sucre assassinated. December 1, arrives prostrate in Santa Marta, Colombia. December 10, dictates will and final proclamation. December 17, Bolívar, reviled and rejected, dies in exile, awaiting departure to Europe.

Body repatriated from Colombia to Venezuela's Pantheon of Heroes.

Manuela Sáenz dies in Ecuador.