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BAPTIS IRVINE'S OBSERVATIONS ON SIMON BOLIVAR, 1818-1819

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Throughout the Latin American Wars of Independence, 1810-1825, United States special agents were dispatched to patriot centers as observers. These agents were to report on the progress of the revolutions and were to protect the rights of American citizens. The agents sent voluminous reports back to the State Department describing outstanding political figures, revolutionary activities, and the progress of patriot governments. In 1818 Baptis Irvine was sent on such a special mission to Venezuela. Many of Irvine's negotiations were carried on personally with Simon Bolivar and the agent had ample opportunity to form an impression of the famed revolutionary hero.

Throughout Irvine's reports to the State Department are found numerous civil, military, and personal references to the Great Liberator. Irvine's impressions were important to the State Department because the special agent was the only American citizen or official to have an extensive personal contact and protracted correspondence with Bolivar.

Irvine's early reports viewed General Bolivar favorably. As time passed, Irvine was unable to satisfactorily adjust United States differences with Venezuela and the reports describing Bolivar became more critical. Irvine was disappointed to find an absence of republican or democratic institutions and soon became jaundiced about Venezuelan politics. The reports in which these observations are to be found are a mixture of fact, fancy, and prejudice. They, nevertheless, constitute one source from which the State Department determined its relations with the newly formed Venezuelan government.

Irvine was an ambitious Irish immigrant who had come to America as a fledgling journalist. He was possessed of considerable ability with a pen and was particularly adept at writing in a vindictive vein. After understudying editors in Philadelphia and Washington, Irvine was editor of Baltimore and New York papers. He was a famous if not infamous liberal and radical. He relished the spirit of controversy; journalistic

duels, litigations, and private quarrels characterized his life.¹ Rash and impetuous, but democratic and humanitarian, Baptis Irvine fought for and championed those ideals in which he believed.

The mission of Agent Irvine to the Venezuelan capital, Angostura, was looked upon with anticipation by Simon Bolivar. The General heartily welcomed Special Agent Irvine and dubbed him the "diputado" of the United States. Irvine commenced his first interview with the Liberator by stating that the object of his mission was to promote a good understanding between Venezuela and the United States.

General Bolivar avowed principles so liberal on every subject broached that one must coincide with him pretty generally. He is an affable, fluent man who appears well informed, theoretically at least, in the most important branches of the policy of states . . . Some say Bolivar is destitute of solid judgement, but he certainly has very good literary abilities, is quick in perception, brilliant and voluble in conversation, eloquent in writing, with the advantage of very agreeable conciliatory manners. . . .²

In 1817 two American merchant ships had been captured by the Venezuelan navy and the State Department wanted Irvine to obtain restitution of the vessels and their property. Irvine appealed to General Bolivar and a lengthy correspondence resulted. The Venezuelan government claimed its actions concerning the ships to be legal. After three months of what Irvine called "hackneyed" correspondence, Bolivar closed the negotiations by refusing to change his position. Irvin wrote,

Thus . . . General Bolivar magisterially terminated a discussion that was daily exposing him to ridicule—desperately clinging to a piratical act as legal capture. . . . Like Macbeth he deemed it so good . . . and on he marched in contempt of truth and justice.³

¹Clarence Brigham, "Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, XXVII, Part 2 (Oct. 17, 1917, 387.

²Baptis Irvine to John Quincy Adams, July 20, 1818, State Department, "Special Agents," MSS. National Archives, VIII.

³Irvine to Adams, Oct. 10, 1818, *ibid.*

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Harsh as this language was, Irvine remarked, it was literally true. He characterized Bolivar's actions:

He has already undergone more changes than a butterfly—successfully passing through the stages of compliment, complaint, petulance, puerility and reproach; sophistry, false assumptions, and unbounded assertions constituting his chief or only weapons.⁴

One subject in which Irvine took special interest was Bolivar's relationship to the civil authority in Venezuela. Prominent and impartial individuals had assured Irvine that no leader other than Bolivar could so effectually lead the people.⁵ Irvine was reticent to accept this evaluation. Bolivar was reputed, he wrote, to be jealous of rivalry in civil and military life. This Irvine believed indicated envy or inferiority or both. Although General Bolivar might have been the one individual capable of maintaining unity among the discordant patriots, he could only accomplish it through a dictatorship. This, to Irvine, was blasphemy against democracy and republicanism. It was the opinion of other citizens that Bolivar held a degree of power tantamount to monarchy.⁶ The reign of this dictator, Irvine believed, had caused disorders that would require years of exertion to repair. Bolivar could boast of having ruined the credit and reputation of his country—he had made enemies, not friends, for Venezuela. "His speeches and proclamations are either directly untrue or so worded as to convey many untruths and deceptions."⁷

Irvine thought it would be no exaggeration to say that most of Bolivar's speeches were intended ". . . to gain him eclat abroad, the population here (in Venezuela) being so debased . . . as to be scarcely worthy of the dexterous acts of deception."⁸ The flourishes of Bolivar must be disregarded—fact must be separated from fancy, the Agent warned. Dissimulation, hardness of assertion, and a spirit of intrigue, characterized his behavior. Irvine went so far as to say that he felt Bolivar would disregard any crime if it favored his designs, provided that impunity and concealment were certain.⁹

Special Agent Irvine was scarcely less complimentary about the General's military leadership. Bolivar had gained power through what Irvine called "false imputation" for only a hand-

⁴Irvine to Adams, Oct. 10, 1818, *ibid.*

⁵Irvine to Adams, July 20, 1818, *ibid.*

⁶Irvine to Adams, Aug. 27, 1818, *ibid.*

⁷Irvine to Adams, Nov. 2, 1818, *ibid.*

⁸Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

⁹Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

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ful of exiled patriots had made Bolivar their military chief. "The burning ambition of the Chief Bolivar, . . . led him to proscribe every officer whose talents or success provoked his envious hate."¹⁰

Not only was Irvine unimpressed with Bolivar's past military record, but with his present one. It has been proved, Irvine wrote, that Bolivar was "unteachable." Irvine estimated that more than twelve thousand men had been furnished Bolivar—enough to have defeated the Spanish with average generalship.¹¹ As Irvine gathered more and more information, his dislike of General Bolivar became more intense.

Without an element of military instruction, he effects the language of Napoleon; without a ray of true political knowledge, or a hint of morality, he apes the style and (it is said) claims the character of a Washington.¹²

During the period of Baptis Irvine's mission to Venezuela the most spectacular event occurred in February 1819. It was during this month that a constitution was adopted, and the established government of Venezuela became actual rather than provisional. General Bolivar in a public pronouncement had renounced his "dictatorial" powers and had called for the establishment of a permanent Venezuelan congress. Irvine had optimistically reported that administrative changes were taking place in the government. "Any change would be an improvement," he wrote. In spite of Bolivar's presence, the new constitution and laws might save Venezuela which had been ". . . more scourged and endangered by a Don Quixote—with military ambitions but unmilitary talents—than by the cruelty of a relentless and savage enemy."¹³ Bolivar's dictatorship must have an end, for the wheels of his government were clogged with imbecility,¹⁴ the Agent wrote.

Finally in one fell swoop Irvine unleashed a broadside attack on the motives, methods, and goals of General Bolivar. Bolivar's proclamation of a Constitution had been calculated to answer the purposes of its author. Irvine believed the proclamation was solely a pretense of humility, for Bolivar wished to perpetuate his power. "By . . . preferring to restore the sov-

¹⁰Irvine to Adams, Sept. 14, 1818, *ibid.*

¹¹Irvine to Adams, Oct. 1, 1818, *ibid.*

¹²Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

¹³Irvine to Adams, Oct. 1, 1818, *ibid.*

¹⁴Irvine to Adams, Oct. 6, 1818, *ibid.*

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ereign power to the people, he insinuates that his dictatorial authority was conferred upon him by the people; which is not the fact."¹⁵ Only a small group of citizens in Caracas had conferred that authority and even at that time Bolivar was in disgrace and out of the country on one of his many flights—for he had almost more flights than "Mohamet." "From that moment to this a harlequin has played the chief part. He now expects, it is said, to increase his power by a congress of ignoramuses; and certain it is he is planning everything for them in advance."¹⁶

Undoubtedly Irvine looked for every shred of information to support his prejudice. He even went so far in one report to state that there were many who would rather see Venezuela remain under the Yoke of Spain for years to come than to see it liberated in the manner and ideals of General Bolivar.¹⁷ The emphasis which Irvine gave to the character of Bolivar was quite clear.

During the meeting of the Congress Irvine did mellow a bit after Bolivar had announced his retirement into private life and avowed his determination to accept no official honors or public spoils.

The act of renunciation on the part of Bolivar, serves to veil the vices and errors of his previous career. His failings and virtues variously represented now, we shall leave to the historians of this revolution to depict. There are many persons here who do not hesitate to assign necessity, arising from incapacity and disappointment, as the sole cause of his resignation. To adopt this explanation of motive were to divest his previous conduct of all title to respect or admiration. It is more liberal, just and charitable to attribute good acts to good motives . . . The account of services and abuses he must settle with his fellow citizens. . . ."¹⁸

Shortly after the adoption of the new Constitution Special Agent Irvine sailed for home, depressed at prospects for republican institutions in Venezuela. To the State Department Irvine recommended the maintenance of cautious neutrality

¹⁵Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

¹⁶Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

¹⁷Irvine to Adams, Oct. 29, 1818, *ibid.*

¹⁸Irvine to Adams, Feb. 16, 1819, *ibid.*

toward Bolivar's government in Venezuela. He wrote books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles championing republicanism and democracy for the Latin American governments. At the same time he pointed out the specter of monarchy or temporary dictatorship as manifested in Simon Bolivar and Venezuela, 1818-1819. Irvine's colorful and literary reports are a primary source for events in Venezuela for this period.