JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

Conference addressed at the Bolivarian Society of Panama’s Solemn Session in commemoration of the 185th anniversary of the passing of Simón Bolívar the Liberator

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Abstract: The 185th anniversary of the death of Simon Bolivar the Liberator is an occasion to celebrate his life and his work, where Panama occupied a special place in his plans for the organization and alliance of the liberated nations as a confederation. Because of its importance for the world, the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama has been recognized by the United Nations as its predecessor, and the Bolivar Hall is part of world heritage at UNESCO since 1997.

Keywords: Death of The Liberator in 1830 – Letters by Bolívar – Congresses of nations and acknowledgement by the United Nations to the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama as its predecessor – Importance of Panama for Bolívar – World Heritage – Current and future importance and relevance of the Salón Bolívar (Bolivar Hall).

Mr. President of the Bolivarian Society of Panama
Your Excellencies Ambassadors
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am deeply honored to share with you this august hall, on the solemn anniversary of the passing of that who in life was Simón Bolívar, The Liberator. Simón Bolívar passed away on the 17th of December, 1830, at 1:00 p.m., at the San Pedro Alejandrino Country House in Santa Marta, Colombian territory. It's been one hundred and five years since his departure from this world. Even though we

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commemorate his passing with deep sadness, it is also an auspicious occasion to celebrate his extraordinary wake on this Continent, and his incorporeal journey to the center of the universe of his unionist ideals for freed America: This sanctuary where we are gathered together today. This sanctuary is the Hall of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá, also known as the Salón Bolívar, which the world at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has recognized as part of our World Heritage, registered under the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage from 1997.

Simón Bolívar was an extraordinary man. In his youth, he found his destiny in this world and set out on its pursuit without hesitation. During his forty seven years of life, he dreamed and planned an America freed from the yoke of colonialism, and with the extraordinary drive of his sheer will, he carried out that plan. At the end of such an extraordinary project, highlighted by exultant triumphs and deep disappointments, the Liberator retired to his last retreat in Santa Marta, afflicted by the deep pain of having to watch from afar how his magnificent project crumbled down.

We may not speak of defeat, because Bolívar's ideals were not defeated; they persist in this room, in this Hall of the Amphictyonic Congress where the precursor Proceedings were signed; it is a national monument and testimony of the Panamanian past. The ideals of Bolívar persist in the organization of national states, and in the hopes of the world for peace and dialogue, united in a multiplicity of congresses. In his collected letters, Bolívar appointed Panamá as the Center of the Universe and he has convened us all to it.

In his famous Jamaica Letter, dated on the 6th of September, 1815, the Liberator mentioned Panama three times concerning his ideal envisioned for the Central American Isthmus. Even as he somberly reasoned that any form of union between the American countries could only prosper under the care of paternal governments, not by forming a mighty republic, nor by creating a universal monarchy, he considered as a possible metropolis for that paternal government Mexico first and then Panamá, saying,
“The metropolis, for example, would be Mexico, which is the only country capable of assuming that role, because of her intrinsic power, without which there can be no metropolis. Let us imagine that the Isthmus of Panama were the metropolis, being the central point for all the extremes of this vast land. Would these not persist in their current state of lethargy and disorder? For a single government to bring to life, to animate, to marshal all the resources of public prosperity, and to correct, enlighten, and perfect the New World, it would have to have the powers of a God, or at least the enlightenment and virtues of all human beings.”

Then, peering visionary into the horizon, he refers again to Panama and says,

“The states of the Isthmus of Panama as far north as Guatemala will perhaps form a confederation. Its magnificent strategic position between two great oceans may in time result in a universal emporium, its canals shortening the distances between worlds and reinforcing commercial ties between Europe, America and Asia, bringing tribute to this happy region from the four quarters of the globe. Here alone, perhaps, it will be possible to establish a world capital, as Constantine aspired for Byzantium to become for the ancient world!”

Despite his initial reservations, Bolivar returns to that unifying dream and justifies the necessity of a Congress, saying,

“The idea of merging the entire New World into a single nation with a single unifying principle to provide coherence to the parts and to the whole is both grandiose and impractical. Because it has a common origin, a common language, similar customs, and one religion, we might conclude that it should be possible for a single government to oversee a federation of the different states eventually to emerge. However, this is not possible, because America is divided by remote climates, diverse geographies, conflicting interests, and dissimilar characteristics. How beautiful it would be if the Isthmus of Panama could be for us what the Corinth was for the Greeks! I hope that someday we will have the good fortune
to install there an august congress of the representatives of these republics, kingdoms, and empires for the purpose of considering and discussing the important issues of peace and war with the nations of the rest of the world. Such a corporation might conceivably emerge at some felicitous moment in our regeneration; any other thought is impractical...”

Six years passed; the liberation struggles yielded fruit in the Americas. Belatedly on November the 28th, 1821, Panama declared its independence from Spain. The news reached Bolivar, and he quickly wrote a letter to Colonel José de Fábrega, Governor General and Commander of the Province of Panama, dated February 1st, 1822 at the Headquarters of Popayán on the occasion of such a laudable event. I will share a few lines:

“Mister Colonel,

Yet without having had the satisfaction of receiving the dispatch that you have been kind enough to address to me, I hasten to congratulate the distinguished province that you have the glory of presiding over. I cannot fully express the feelings of joy and wonder I have experienced upon learning that Panamá, the center of the universe, is regenerated by her own volition, and free by her own virtue. The Act of Independence of Panama, is the most glorious monument that any American province may offer to History. Everything is consulted there, in regards to justice, generosity, politics and general interest.

Do convey on my behalf to those meritorious Colombians, the tribute of my enthusiasm for their pure patriotism and true generosity. Without delay, a part of the army of Colombia, under the command of Colonel Carreño, must have secured already the fate of that precious emporium of commerce and exchange of the world.”

On such high regard Bolivar held this land between the seas! His letter to Fábrega thus ended,
“I reiterate the expressions of sincere gratitude, with which I accepted on behalf of Colombia the services that you and that generous people have done to thus complete the scope that Providence and Nature had designed to our mighty republic. May God keep you for many and long years.

BOLÍVAR.”

To Bolívar, Panamá was most definitely the Center of the Universe, towards which gravitated his mighty unionist effort into a congress of countries on sovereign, egalitarian footing. To Bolivar, Panama probably was the center of a geopolitical universe of vast logistics and communication networks. In 1824, as President of Colombia and Leader Supreme of Peru, Bolivar picked up the pen again to materialize that Congress, sending out the joyful challenge to join a meeting in Panamá: The Invitation Letter, dated on the 7th of December of 1824, two days prior the Ayacucho Battle. The Invitation Letter convened the countries to this place where we have met today. He invited the republics of Colombia, Central America, Mexico, the United Provinces of Buenos Aires, Chile and Brazil. The United States of America were invited by General Santander as acting Vice President of Colombia. The Republic of Colombia was composed by present day’s Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panamá. The Republic of Central America was formed by Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. (Castillero, 1995: 41)

“It seems to me that if the world had to choose its capital, the Isthmus of Panama would be ideal for this august purpose, situated as it is in the center of the globe, looking towards Asia on one side and toward Africa and Europe on the other. The Isthmus of Panama has been offered for this purpose in the existing treaties by the government of Colombia... The day on which our plenipotentiaries exchange credentials will mark the beginning of an immortal period in the diplomatic history of America. A hundred centuries from now, when posterity seeks the origin of our public law, and they recall the treaties that consolidated their destiny, they will look with awe on the protocols of the Isthmus. There, they will find the outline of our first alliances, which will trace the progress of our
relations with the rest of the world. Then the Isthmus of Corinth will pale in comparison with that of Panamá!” (Bolívar, Invitation letter, 1824)

Dear Panamá! The conditions of our capital city were not the best. A quick look at two cartographic references can show the state of Panamá city at the time of the Amphictyonic the Panama Congress of 1826; the map of Panamá City drawn by Vicente Talledo and Rivera in 1814, and the map of Panamá City in 1850 by Tiedemann. Both maps show a city in ruins, with more than 30% of buildable area marked barren, ruined, or overgrown with vegetation. The map dated in 1850 shows the city in better shape than in 1814. Panamá City was far from being an affluent city in 1826, as it was going through a slow economic period and most likely it had an unattractive appearance. However, Simon Bolívar the Liberator was convinced of the geopolitical importance of the geographical position of the Isthmus of Panama, as reflected in his Jamaica Letter in 1815, and in his letter to José de Fábrega in 1822. Bolívar never saw Panama with his own eyes. However, Ernesto Castillero (1995) informs us that in 1822, having received reports regarding Panama City as having unsanitary conditions, Bolívar wanted to change the venue to Quito, but it was too late to change the venue. The Chapter Hall of the Convent of San Francisco was selected by the provincial government to host the sessions of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama. The room identified as that Chapter Hall of the Convent of San Francisco, was restored in the 2000s, and here we find ourselves today. This is the space that housed the idea; its permanence with all its ideological associations and the interpretation of its relations on a world scale give strength to its outstanding universal value as world heritage since 1997.

The Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá of 1826 set a milestone in world history and it was precursor to current leagues of nations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States. This would not have happened if the Liberator had not been fully convinced of the importance of Panama as a node of communications, with great potential to build a canal and to become a commercial emporium accessible to the Americas, Europe and Asia; in short, Panamá was to him the center of that universe he had envisioned.
If only projects perfectly planned on paper turned out an integral success in reality! But often many unexpected factors contribute to the collapse of the most carefully designed machinery. The Amphictyonic Congress, in the absence of Bolívar much to his regret, did not become all that the Liberator had hoped it would, to the point of him exclaiming,

“The Congress of Panama, an institution that ought to be admirable if it had more efficacy, is nothing other than that crazy Greek who pretended to direct from a rock the ships that sailed.” (Castillero, 1995: 168)

Once the Amphictyonic Congress ended, it was decided in meeting on July 15th, 1826 to continue the Congress’s sessions in the town of Tacubaya in Mexico; but due to various reasons, it was impossible to continue with the sessions there. For this reason, the Amphictyonic Congress came to a definitive end in Tacubaya and it was declared dissolved on December 17th, 1827. (Castillero, 1995: 170).

The Bolivarian Society, especially the Bolivarian Society of Panamá as you know well, dates back to 1926 and to the Pan American Congress that commemorated the first centennial of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá. The founding act of the Bolivarian Society of Panamá was signed on the 20th of July of 1929. Ever since, Bolivarian Society of Panamá’s ongoing mission is “to venerate relentlessly the memory of the Liberator”. (MIRE, 2015)

In the twentieth century, two world wars ravaged the world with their load of intolerance, hatred and death. After the end of World War II in 1945, the world started on its way to the creation of a Congress as that Bolivar had dreamed more than a century before, with the implementation of the Constitution of the United Nations (UN) in October of that same year (2012), with Panama as one of its member states. Taking another step toward the advancement of peace, on November 16th, 1945, was established the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose main mission enshrined in its constitution reads,
“The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.” (UNESCO, 2010).

In 1948, the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes the equality of all human beings without distinction. These efforts to leave behind the horrors of war and discrimination laid a foundation on which to build peace, based on the assumption that all men and women in their condition of equality have equal rights and duties as citizens of the world and that no culture is superior to another. Here, we may recognize another of Bolivar’s ideals that coincides with this happy labor, laid out in this Jamaica Letter in 1815: To create “an august congress of the representatives of these republics, kingdoms, and empires for the purpose of considering and discussing the important issues of peace and war with the nations of the rest of the world”, on egalitarian and sovereign footing. If only it was created in Panama, as Bolivar had dreamed! But, there’s more. (Castillero, 1995: 29) (Osorio, 2012: 3-4)

The Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea published on the Annex III of its Final Act the text, Tribute to Simon Bolivar the Liberator, publicly rendering their respect and admiration to Bolivar on the anniversary of this birth on the 24th of July, 1974, acknowledging in him “a man of vision and early champion of international organization, and a historic figure of universal dimensions”, and that his works “based on the concepts of liberty and justice as foundations for the peace and progress of peoples, has left an indelible mark on history and constitutes a source of constant inspiration”. (ONU, 1982: 149).

In 1976, the United Nations convened to bestow an especial acknowledgement to Simón Bolivar as its precursor and to the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá as its predecessor. During its 31st Period of Sessions, the General Assembly of the United Nations convened its especial commemorative 103rd plenary meeting on December
the 17th, 1976, to pay homage to the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá. In that session was approved the Resolution 31/142 One hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá, as follows:

The General Assembly,

Having decided to hold a special commemorative plenary meeting to pay a tribute to Simon Bolivar, the Liberator, on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama, which met on 22 June 1826,

Considering that the main objective of that Congress was to constitute an assembly of confederated countries which should establish the legal foundations for the relations between the American Republics and all the nations of the world, and should serve as "a council during periods of great conflicts, to be appealed to in the event of common danger, and to be a faithful interpreter of public treaties when difficulties arise, in brief, to conciliate all our differences", concepts which form the basis of the international law of the American countries and are thus the direct predecessors of the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Charter of the United Nations,

Bearing in mind that Bolivar envisaged a Latin American region of free and brotherly countries united by common ideals, a dream which makes him the precursor of the integration of that region,

Recognizing that the Treaty of Perpetual Union, League and Confederation, signed in Panama on 15 July 1826, reflects a universalist spirit which is currently embodied by the United Nations, in that it reaffirms the sovereignty and independence of States and their intention "to secure to themselves from this time forward the enjoyment of unalterable peace, and to promote in this behalf better harmony and good understanding as well between the countries, citizens and subjects, respectively, as with the other Powers with which they should maintain or enter into friendly relations", 

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Recalling that Simon Bolivar referred on several occasions to the need for a possible opening of a canal in Panama, which "will shorten distances throughout the world, strengthen commercial ties" between the continents and promote the exchange of projects "from the four corners of the globe",

1. Pays a tribute to Simon Bolivar, the Liberator, as a promoter of Latin American integration and as a builder of constructive plans for international organization on a continental and world-wide scale and, in this connexion, decides to place a commemorative plaque in the United Nations Headquarters building as a permanent tribute to his memory;

2. Recognizes that the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama represents the most outstanding and audacious unionist experiment at the international level in the nineteenth century, with ecumenical features which anticipate and coincide with the objectives of the United Nations system;

3. Expresses the hope that the ideal of Bolivar will inspire the establishment of a more just international order of respect for law, devoted to the maintenance of peace, the preservation of democratic principles, the promotion of economic and social progress, and the freedom of all peoples;

4. Formulates the wish for a successful outcome of the negotiations for the conclusion of a new treaty on the Panama Canal, which will eliminate the causes of conflict between the Republic of Panama and the United States of America, in accordance with the Declaration of Principles, signed by the parties concerned on 7 February 1974, where it is stated that the Panamanian territory of which the Panama Canal is a part shall be returned promptly to the jurisdiction of the Republic of Panama and that the Republic of Panama "will assume total responsibility for the operation of the Canal upon the termination of the treaty";

5. Requests the Secretary-General to arrange for the circulation to all Member States of a document reproducing the instrument of convocation and the agreements of the Amphictyonic Congress of 1826, the original texts of which,
currently kept in Rio de Janeiro, will be deposited in Panama by decision of the
Government of Brazil, at an appropriate time, to be preserved in the
monument to be erected in that country as part of the Bolívar commemoration.

103rd plenary meeting

As stated, after being considered lost for many years, the original Proceedings of
the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá resurfaced in Brazil. Ernesto J. Castillero
realidad del Pacto Americano (Bolívar in Panama - Origins and reality of the American
Pact)", describing how the lost Proceedings of the Amphictyonic Congress of 1826
returned to Panamá. The finding is centered on the article, "Las Actas Extraviadas del
Congreso de Panamá de 1826 (The lost Proceedings of the Congress of Panamá in
1826)" published in 1944 by Dr. Julio Escudero Guzmán, then titular professor of
International Law at the University of Santiago de Chile. In his article, Escudero
Guzmán asserted that he had found them in the Archivo Histórico del Palacio
Itamaraty, in Rio de Janeiro. The Brazilian Chancellery had acquired the Proceedings
from a private by the approximate sum of 5,000 American dollars, and got them
authenticated. The Bolivarian Society of Panamá conducted important negotiations
in order to secure a photostatic copy of the Proceedings. These were later published
at the cited book by historian Ernesto J. Castillero, who was President of the
Bolivarian Society of Panamá in the period from 1936 to 1940. His book came first
published in 1976. As we have just seen, on that same year Brazil promised to deliver
the original Proceedings to Panama for custody.

By that time, the Hall of the Amphictyonic Congress had already been declared
national monument by law, specifically, the Act 63 of the 6th of June, 1941, "that
sponsors the Bolivarian Society of Panamá" declared the Salón Bolívar of the La Salle
School as a national monument, on its article 7. Act 91 of 22nd of December, 1976,
had created the Historic Monuments Group of the Historic Centre of Panamá City,
and this was the focus of governmental interest with large scale restoration projects.
The La Salle School, nowadays the Bolívar Palace and headquarters of the Chancellery of Panamá, was rehabilitated for such new use, and the wing containing the Salón Bolívar was restored from 2001 to 2004. The building complex’s reform was under architect Álvaro González Clare, and the restoration of the Salón Bolívar was carried out by restoration architect Raúl Murillo. (Tejeira, 2007: 211)

From 1931 with the Athens Charter, and especially since the end of the World War II, events on a global scale led to a special interest in the preservation of cultural and natural heritage as a unique treasure that is the inheritance of all human beings. It was under this interest that the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, also known as the World Heritage Convention, was approved by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1972. It was ratified by Panama in 1978. Its full text was incorporated to national law by Act 9 of the 27th of October, 1977. (Osorio, 2012: 3)

The World Heritage Convention recognizes mankind in a unitary and universal manner, accepting that the cultural and natural heritage of every people belongs to all mankind as a whole and therefore their damage or loss negatively affects all their heirs, which are all mankind. The World Heritage Convention introduces the term outstanding universal value (OUV), referring to the outstanding interest in certain irreplaceable heritage assets. Each one is part of a collective treasure of universal influence over human beings and their environment, as pieces that help to articulate places and events that constitute World Heritage. (Osorio, 2012: 4-5)

“Outstanding Universal Value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole. The Committee defines the criteria for the inscription of properties on the World Heritage List.” (WHC, 2015: 11)

In 1997, thanks to the driving efforts of the Bolivarian Society of Panama at the early stages of State interest, Panamá achieved inscription on the World Heritage List
for the property, "Historic District of Panama with the Salón Bolívar (Panama) (790)". Thus, this monument where we are gathered today reached the highest recognition as a cultural milestone in human history. (UNESCO, 1997)

In 2003, the property was extended in order to include the historic group of monuments of Panamá Viejo under the same inscription, changing the world heritage property's name to, "Archaeological Site of Panamá Viejo and Historic District of Panamá (Panamá) (790bis)“, which is its current name. (UNESCO, 2003)

This is how the Hall of the Amphictyonic Congress of Panamá, called by the world the Salón Bolívar, came to represent us beyond our national borders as a vital part of our world heritage that is memory and record for the future generations of humanity. The Salón Bolívar’s relevance at world scale is a presentation card for the country, and the Proceedings of the Amphictyonic Congress are an invaluable treasure of our common history; not only shared with the countries that took part in the august congress of Bolívar, but also shared with the whole world. On their behalf, we custody the Salón Bolívar and the Proceedings of the Amphictyonic Congress with zeal.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered together at the Center of the Universe, not only in commemoration of Simón Bolívar the Liberator’s departure from this world, but also in solemn celebration of his immortal legacy for the whole of humanity.

Panamá, 17th of December, 2015.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


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