**“The Jamaica Letter” by Simon Bolivar:** Kingston, Jamaica, September 6, 1815.

Translated by Lewis Bertrand in Selected Writings of Bolivar, (New York: The colonial Press Inc., 1951)

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The so-called Jamaica Letter was written in 1815 during a self-imposed exile in Jamaica. It was addressed to “an English gentleman,” probably the island’s governor, the Duke of Manchester. The Venezuelan Republic had collapsed in May as a result of a viciously fought Spanish counteroffensive, divisions among the revolutionaries, and opposition from many Indians, blacks, and mulattos, who viewed the Creole landowners, not the Spaniards, as their oppressors. The letter was written in response to a request from the Englishman for Bolívar’s thoughts about the background and prospects of the liberation movement.

**Section 1**

...Success will crown our efforts, because the destiny of America has been decided; the tie that bound her [America] to Spain has been severed... That which formerly bound them now divides them. The hatred that the Peninsula (the Iberian peninsula of Spain and Portugal) has inspired in us is greater than the ocean between us... 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 principle of sympathy that seemed eternal... 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... 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...

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**Section 2**

[Latin] Americans today who live within the Spanish system occupy a position in society no better than that of serfs destined for labor... Yet even this status is surrounded with infuriating 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 [Spain and Portugal] itself does not possess... 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...

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.

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**Section 3**

It is harder, Montesquieu has written, to release a nation from servitude than to enslave a free nation. This truth is proven by the histories 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 [Latin] 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. . .

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**Section 4**

From the previous sections, we can draw these conclusions: The American provinces [colonies] 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 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

Original Source: http://faculty.smu.edu/bakewell/BAKEWELL/texts/jamaica-letter.html Extracted from: Andrea, Alfred J, James H. Overfield: The Human Record, Sources of Global History, 5th edition, vol. II: Since 1500. New York, Houghton Mifflin, pp 200-203





Instructions: Read the attached extract from “The Jamaica Letter” and answer the questions on the last page. Use full sentences in your answers an, where applicable, quote directly from this primary source within your answer.

AP World History Simon Bolivar – “The Jamaica Letter”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Why does Bolivar believe that Spain’s efforts to hold on to its American territories are doomed?
2. What Spanish policies, according to Bolívar, made Spanish rule odious (hateful) to him and other revolutionaries?
3. In Bolívar’s view, what complicates the task of predicting Spanish America’s political future?
4. Does Bolívar’s letter reveal concern for the economic and social condition of South America’s nonwhite population? What are some of the implications of Bolívar’s attitudes?
5. Based on your reading of Bolívar, what guesses can you make about the reasons why the new nations of South America found it difficult to achieve stable republican governments?