

Why did Gran Columbia Fail?

There are several reasons, but the main one, in my opinion, is *geography*.

Let's take a quick look to today's countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador):



(Yes, I took the picture from Google Maps. Is just simpler).

Something particular you notice? I'll give you 2 clues: mountains and cities.

First, the cities. You can arrange a curvy line separating the places which have cities from the places who don't. Notice most (if not all) of them concentrate at the east and north.

The middle is what's known as the "llanos" and the Amazon rainforest. Even today, these places have little population, and back then were mostly empty (except for the Venezuelan Llanos, to which I will come back later).

Second: notice how most of the cities are places in the mountains? Communication, even today, is very difficult due to the sloppy geography: back then a trip from Cartagena to Bogota could take around a month. And going from Bogota to Quito or Caracas could double that time. I don't know the times in the US colonies, but I'm pretty sure they were much, MUCH better (I actually couldn't find any information here. Any of you fellas know

how much a travel from Georgia to Maine lasted around 1800? I'm betting, by sea or with a horse, not more than a week).

So yeah, hard geography, but why does this matter?

Let's go back for a moment. What allows or triggers a process of political unification? Answer varies from time to time, but in this period there were essentially 3 factors:

- Unified economy/constant exchange and interaction.
- Cultural affinity and similarities.
- The existence of a powerful city or region that can take control over the rest.

In late 18th century, the US had at least the first two: the 13 colonies had constant contact with each other and a similar cultural background. In the early 19th century the Great Colombia lacked all three... thanks to the geography.

Commerce with other regions made no sense. Sending a good from Bogota to Caracas was ridiculously expensive, even more than sending one from Caracas to Spain. This led to a certain isolation of every political unit (remember there were 3 at colonial times, the Viceroyalty of New Grenade, with Bogota as capital, the Captaincy of Venezuela, with Caracas as capital, and the Captaincy of Quito, you can guess the capital). Most of the goods produced by the regions were either exported via the closest port or exchanged in a local area. Bogota had nearly no trading at all with Caracas and Quito.

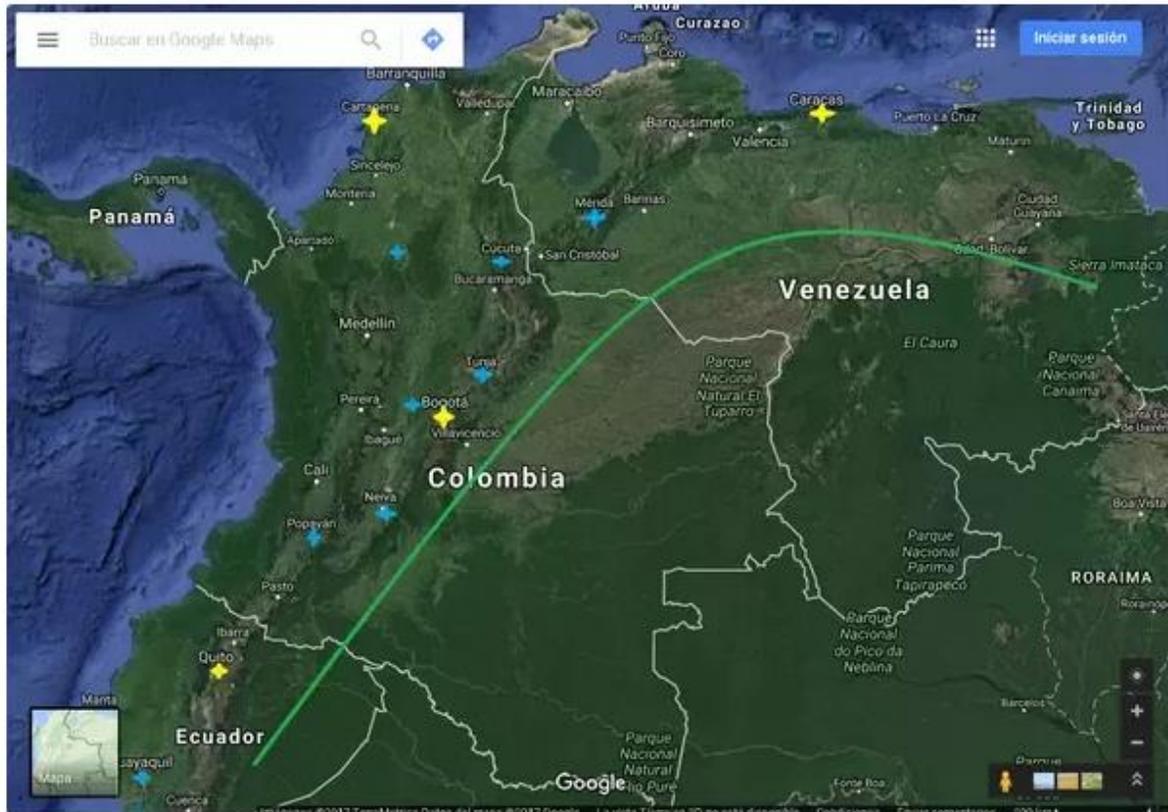
The cultural argument is a very hard one. Just stay with me here and remember, even if the US colonies had differences, they were not as steep as the ones in this land.

At last, no city was big enough to claim supremacy. We didn't have a Buenos Aires or a Mexico City. Bogota in 1800 had around 20.000 inhabitants, same as Quito; Cartagena, around 25.000 (before the traumatic siege of 1815, after which many fled and/or died). Caracas had around 30.000 (before the war and earthquake).

You see, there were pretty even. Each capital had its own political affairs. Each had their own elites with particular interests. They had their own taxes and governments.

And without trade, they really had no reason to stay together, other than ideology.

So this gives us a map like this:



Below the green line lives nobody, all cities and population are above. In yellow I painted the main cities, in blue other important cities at the period.

Look how Venezuela's Llanos are much closer to the ocean, allowing them to produce and export cattle, and to have a higher influence in the main cities. Colombian Llanos are far away from the ocean and only the parts near the mountains are populated (they sent cattle to Bogotá and other cities there). Ecuador has no llanos, but forest, and besides indigenes nobody really lives there. For this reason, Venezuela was the only country to have an important "Llanero" population.

Now, let's get to the independence process. Long story short, Bolivar got a Venezuelan army, mainly consisting in "llaneros" (that is, people from the lowland Llanos), who were mixed race cowboys... great warriors and riders. They made quite a force and Bolivar greatest success was finding an alliance with them, as they were a greatly feared force of soldiers.

This army then came to Colombia and "freed" us from the Spaniards, then continued south, towards Quito. The army had little to do with early Colombian native armies (which by then had been wiped out) and it behaved basically as an occupation force. Colombian (and particularly Bogotá's) population wasn't happy at all about this.

When Bolivar came back to Bogota, he wished to keep this effective army, but had no money to pay for it. Unwilling to let his hard won forces melt away, he extended taxes into a region which lacked infrastructure and was still recovering from a long civil war and several natural disasters. (Remember the earthquake which destroyed the 1st Republic?) Thanks to the economic burdens and the growing tensions with the Llanero soldiers, the Colombian population quickly grew tired of taxes and started pressing to send the neighboring Venezuelans to send a Venezuelan army, harming the future relationship between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Bolivar expected to become a king-like president, in the model of Napoleon Bonaparte (who he had met in Europe). For Bolivar, taking on near dictatorial powers would not have seemed out of the ordinary... The long legacy of Spanish rule by a monarch coupled with a Europe dominated by a French Emperor made Bolivar's ascension a logical step. Although the United States was a republic, there were few similar states and he likely felt justified in creating a stable benevolent dictatorship. Unfortunately for Bolivar, a number of his followers had been expecting a different outcome and unrest grew. Given the poor communications and infrastructure of the region, Caracas and Quito were not willing to wait 3+ months to make an important decision, and they wished for a federation, but Bolivar refused. However, even if a Federation was indeed created, it would've probably only postponed the fall of the country, as there were no real links to keep the regions together.

Colonial Spanish states were weak, had few links among regions and relied to a great degree on some self-governance by the local elites. Without the symbolic figure of the king to keep them together, this local elites simply took whatever path they found most convenient and self serving. The real question here is how only 3 countries came out of the Great Colombia. For comparison, look at this neighboring region that broke away from Spain:



This was the “General Captaincy of Guatemala”, which turned into the United Provinces of Central America. It is much smaller than the Great Colombia... but fragmented into 6 countries (5 if you don’t count Belize).



By comparison, Gran Colombia fared much better, even if it fell short of Bolivar’s ambition.