
Remarks at the Council of the Americas 38th Annual Meeting

By

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

[The following are excerpts from the Secretary's remarks delivered at the Loy Henderson Auditorium, Washington, DC, May 7, 2008.]

Members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to be back here with the Council of the Americas here in the State Department. You do so much to advance our common interests and our common values throughout this hemisphere.

I want to thank you for strengthening the ties between peoples—our NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations], our teachers, our students, and our business communities. I want to thank you for your tireless efforts to educate about our hemisphere and to push for our common interests.

And you know, it struck me this morning that this is going to be my last time speaking to the Council of the Americas as Secretary. Thank you for recognizing that that's not an applause line.

But seriously though, it's a temptation to, at this time in an administration, start to look to the past and to look at all that we've done together. I don't really want to dwell on this too much because there's never been a time in modern history when our country's relationship with the hemisphere is more oriented to the future.

But if you'll allow me for one moment to go back and look at what has happened since 2001, I would submit to you that we've witnessed nothing less than a social revolution in most of our hemisphere in recent years; and its cause has been democracy. Democracy has been opening up old, elite-dominated politics to millions who had been on the margins of their societies: the poor and the disadvantaged and indigenous peoples and minorities. These men and women have at last become active democratic citizens, and they are demanding that their governments work for them. They are addressing long-standing problems of poverty and inequality and social exclusion that have ever been so real in our hemisphere. If I could sum up this process of change, I would say it's been a time for inclusion, a time for people to feel at home, and to participate in the destiny of their nations.

This revolution has realigned the politics of the Americas. New leaders have emerged, from both the left and the right—responsible democratic leaders who are rejecting old ideological shibboleths and working pragmatically to expand opportunity, to reduce poverty, and to ensure security. They are showing that good governance, the rule of law, democracy, and markets can deliver people's rightfully high expectations of the governments that they have elected.

This belief was reflected in the outcomes of nearly all of the 17 elections held in 2006, for instance. And it's been the real story in recent years of democracy: not some left turn; not some populist rejection of markets and trade; but indeed the creation of a new hemispheric consensus that, as our Inter-American Democratic Charter states, "democracy is essential for the social, political, and economic development of the peoples of the Americas."

This underscores something really important—that by democracy, people in this hemisphere just don't mean a political mechanism for transferring power. They mean democracy in broader social and economic terms, a system in which all have access to opportunity and the mobility that it brings.

To be sure, there have been exceptions to this broader positive trend—a few places where rulers have exploited people's legitimate fears and needs and longings in order to expand their own autocratic power. These are heartbreaking setbacks for our hemisphere. But though some rulers may clamor to

draw attention to themselves, it does not alter the fact that they are on the wrong side of history in the Americas; history is passing them by.

The main idea is this: Democracy is literally changing the character of countries in the Americas. It is producing popular governments that are redefining their national interests, engaging with one another in new ways, and adapting their societies to be competitive in the global economy—all in ways [that] would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago. In short, there is a political and diplomatic ferment in our hemisphere that is palpable and overwhelmingly positive.

And the nature of leadership in the Americas is changing too. Canada is building new and far-reaching partnerships in this region and committing its talents and its resources to advance our shared values, not just in this hemisphere but beyond it—in Afghanistan. Brazil, a regional leader, is an emerging global player; and it's looking outward as never before. And we are building a partnership—the United States and Brazil together—that will matter for decades to come in this world. A relationship that was always defined by potential is now being defined by accomplishments. And when the two largest democracies in the hemisphere cooperate to promote energy independence, the eradication of malaria in Africa, and the fight against racism and intolerance, the impact can be profound.

And at this time of sweeping change, the United States is also changing its role. Frankly, I think since 2001, we have learned to be better partners for this region. We've come to see more clearly that the quest for social justice is the defining issue for most countries and most peoples, that the realization of its huge implications for a country's success means that the United States must position ourselves to be part of the solution. We have sought, and we've built strong relationships with democratic governments on the left and on the right. We have charged no ideological price for America's friendship.

And we've been actively able to do this because we have stayed consistently engaged. President Bush has made more trips in the Americas than any President in U.S. history. He has received more leaders here in Washington from Latin America and the Caribbean than any of his predecessors. And beyond governments, our engagement has spanned the full spectrum of our societies—our teachers and our students, our NGOs and our faith communities, and of course, people like you in the private sector. We have deepened the enduring connections of culture and commerce, family and friendship. The broad engagement was evident in last year's White House Conference on the Americas, which many of you attended. And I can tell you; increasingly, when I meet the young people of the region, as I just recently did, youth ambassadors from Nicaragua and from Bolivia and from Venezuela, I see that the faces of the Americas are so diverse and that diversity is finally being represented in the people who are getting access to those wonderful scholarships and fellowships that will make them leaders in their countries in the future.

I believe then, in recent years, we've seen a convergence of ideals and interests. Among nations in the region and amidst all the different traditions that we embody, we agree on first principles—that the path to greater opportunity and social justice is different for every country, but the features are similar: democracy and the rule of law, responsible governance and open economies, investment in the health and education of people.

Here in this country, among our Administration and in the Congress and among our public and private sectors, I believe we've forged agreement, bipartisan agreement, on the first principles of our policy in the Americas, that the potential of our hemisphere is enormous; that the success of our neighbors is intimately linked to our own; that we can now build partnerships rooted not only in common interests but in common values; and that we must support democratic leaders in tackling the challenges of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion.

Now, it's not to say that differences don't still remain between the United States and our neighbors—between our neighbors and even perhaps within the United States itself. They do. But because we share first principles, because we are committed to one another's success, and because we are engaging with one another, communicating with one another, our differences do not define us. Indeed, exchanged honestly and respectfully, our differences can strengthen us.

Most democratic governments in our hemisphere—left, right, and center—are doing the right things to help their people prosper. They're opening markets and expanding opportunity and boosting trade and attracting investment and fighting corruption and enforcing the rule of law. We respect the results that they are achieving, and we are supporting them.

Under President Bush, and with the support of the Congress and our people, the United States has doubled development assistance in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2001. We have led multilateral efforts to forgive old debts that too long had saddled the potential of some of the poorest countries in our region. And through the Millennium Challenge Account initiative, we have created new incentives to reduce poverty—through just governance, economic freedom, and investment in people.

This consensus on development recognizes the vital importance of free and fair trade. When governments invest in their people, trade can enable countries to fuel their own economic and social transformation.

Building on NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], our Administration has negotiated ten free trade agreements [FTAs] since 2001 with our partners in the Americas. If our Congress passes our agreements with Panama and Colombia, an issue that I'll return to in a moment, we will have effectively created an unbroken chain of free-trading nations from the top of Canada to the tip of Chile. These FTAs are the strategic platforms that enable our democracies to reach across the Pacific and compete successfully with the rising powers of Asia.

Together, these efforts represent a new approach to development rooted in partnership and mutual responsibility. This is furthering the common hemispheric vision of a just society, one in which self-improvement and social mobility are the prospect of all citizens, not the privilege of a few.

The new democratic consensus in our hemisphere also recognizes that our economic and social development must be defended. So we have built partnerships, again, rooted in shared first principles and mutual responsibility to ensure our collective hemispheric security.

Canada, Mexico, and the United States have created the Security and Prosperity Partnership underscoring that North American relationships bring enormous benefits, like jobs and energy security and lower prices, to the citizens of all three countries. Today, the \$14 trillion economic zone of North America is undisputedly the platform for long-term success in the world. And through the Security and Prosperity Partnership, we are now building the shared capacity to defend our livelihoods from any challenge and to respond to any emergency that might threaten our success.

We are doing so in other ways too. Through the Merida Initiative, which is now before the Congress, the United States, Mexico, and the nations of Central America will cooperate to defend our societies and economies from criminal gangs and drug traffickers. This is unprecedented. For the first time, we and our neighbors are developing regional security strategies to combat threats that we can only defeat together.

We've maintained partnerships to support two democracies in winning their struggles for sustainable security.

So through the work of a courageous government and people, and with a long-term commitment from the United States, Colombia has transformed itself from a state on the verge of failure not seven

years ago to a nation now on the brink of success; whose democratic government is reclaiming its country from narco-terrorists and expanding opportunity for its people.

And in Haiti, many nations in the Americas have joined together in an unprecedented partnership for democratic state-building, marrying security and peacekeeping efforts to reconstruction and development, to try and support finally for the people of Haiti the creation of effective institutions.

Taken together, our many common endeavors with our democratic neighbors represent partnerships that will meet our present and future challenges. And building this has been possible because the United States has been deeply engaged. The challenge in the months and years ahead is to strengthen the practical points of consensus that define that engagement. And much of that challenge, frankly, is internal to the United States.

There are a lot of tough issues before us, or soon to be before us that will test the principles of an engagement in the Americas. One is trade, specifically the agreements we've concluded with Colombia and Panama. In recent decades, administrations of both parties, along with majorities in Congress, sustained bipartisan U.S. support for free and fair trade. But I must tell you that today, this consensus is under fire. Trade is absolutely vital to our nation's competitiveness, but we cannot afford to look at trade just as a domestic issue. Trade is also essential to our foreign policy, to our national interests, to the security and prosperity of our neighbors, and thus, to the security and prosperity of the United States.

The majority of our citizens in the hemisphere want more trade not less. And if the leaders of Congress reject free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama, it will be they who [are] neglecting this hemisphere. And it will signal only one thing: retreat from that that we have achieved, retreat from our nation's long-standing engagement and leadership in the Americas, and retreat from two democratic partners who want and need our support. I assure you: those who will benefit most from disengagement or retreat would be those who least share our values.

There's another challenge that is coming, and that is the transition in Cuba—the only country in the Americas not ruled by a government that its people have chosen. We respect the dignity and the talent of the Cuban people. And we believe unequivocally that Cuba deserves, no less than any other nation in the Americas, to choose its own future freely, without outside interference.

Any attempt to ease Cuba into the 21st century through relatively small and highly controlled economic openings will not work in the long term. The Cuban regime must show that it's got the confidence in itself and in its people to stop using the secret police to control political discourse. The regime must and should remove the fear factor from Cuba's political life.

We are eager to support Cuba and its talented people in transforming its society. We want to engage with Cuba. We want to engage its people as free citizens, not as subjects.

So ladies and gentlemen, when I think back over this time, I arrive at one basic idea: What a difference a decade can make. What a remarkable period of consolidation for market-led, socially committed democracy across the region. The democracies of the Americas are now interacting and speaking with one another and working with one another as never before. They are experimenting with a wide variety of new ideas to foster greater integration. They are more active in the rest of the world and more engaged in the global economy, with increasing confidence and success.

Our different countries represent many different traditions and many different cultures. But we are defining a common future, a common future grounded in common values: freedom and equality, human dignity, and social justice. These values are our values, America's values. They link this hemisphere, and they firmly ground the United States as a firm part of this proud and free hemisphere.

The people of the Americas are rightfully impatient for better lives. They are holding their democratic leaders to higher standards, and they increasingly have the option to do that. And I would just say just one final word about the United States. To remain influential in our hemisphere, we must remain engaged; and to remain engaged we must be really present. We must continue to show our hemispheric partners that we understand their problems, that we can and want to be active in helping to solve them, and that their success is our success.

This is in keeping with our national traditions. It has and will increasingly define our role in the region. And I am confident that it can form the foundation of a new and enduring engagement for a hemisphere of democracy, prosperity, and peace.