
Remarks at the 38th General Assembly of the Organization of American States

By

John D. Negroponte
Deputy Secretary of State

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Sixty years ago, the nations of the Americas came together here in Colombia to adopt the OAS [Organization of American States] Charter and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. These two documents united our region in a commitment to human rights, social justice, and representative democracy. As a result, we have witnessed a transformation of our hemisphere. Millions of once marginalized citizens now have a voice in their societies; and they are electing responsible leaders who are working pragmatically to expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and ensure security.

No country embodies this transformation more than Colombia, and perhaps no city more than Medellin. Not long ago, Medellin suffered the plagues of violence and narco-trafficking. Now Medellin grows more prosperous and secure every day. Medellin's rebirth makes it an apt setting to discuss our hemispheres democratic future.

The theme of our meeting, "Youth and Democratic Values," reminds us that thanks to the enormous sacrifices of past generations, today's youth have not known coups or military dictatorships. To the contrary, they have grown up under a democratic political process and look to that process to continue providing economic opportunities, redressing inequalities, and ending social exclusion.

Indeed, the youth of the Americas are already a force for progress. Here in Colombia this past February, for example, a young engineer launched "Un Millón de Voces Contra Las FARC" [translates "One Million Voices Against the FARC" (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)] on the Facebook website. Within days, hundreds of thousands of youth added their voices to his; and on February 3 and 4, millions more did so in person in over 100 cities around the world.

We also see the youth of the Americas influencing their societies even where that influence is resisted. In Cuba, for instance, Yoani Sanchez explains to the world the difficulty of life under dictatorship through her website, Generation Y. For her determined defense of freedom, Yoani received the prestigious Ortega y Gasset Award. Although Cuba's Government denied Yoani permission to travel to Spain to receive her award in person, she remains a shining example of the Cuban people's brave spirit. Cubans, no less than any other people in the Americas, deserve the opportunity to elect their leaders and representatives freely and democratically.

The United States strongly supports the OAS's work to ensure the fairness and credibility of democratic elections through its observer and technical assistance missions. We applaud the OAS's assistance to nascent democratic institutions in Haiti. It is, therefore, now crucial that the international community show united support for President Preval and the Government of Haiti as they seek to install a Prime Minister and hold overdue Senate elections and continue to be responsive to the fundamental needs of the Haitian people.

And we endorse the OAS's "Program on Education for Democratic Values and Practices" as a means of anchoring democratic values everywhere through civic education.

The United States is committed to reinforcing the OAS's work. Since 2001, we have adopted policies to help bring greater economic and social opportunity to our hemisphere. And to promote its integration:

- We have doubled development assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean.
- We have led a multilateral effort to forgive billions of dollars in debts.
- And through free trade, we have created opportunities for people throughout our hemisphere to tap into the dynamic opportunities of the global market.

In fact, this Administration has negotiated 10 free trade agreements with our partners in the Americas. If Congress passes our agreements with Colombia and Panama, we will have created an unbroken chain of free-trading nations stretching from Canada to Chile.

As you all know, trade is a powerful engine of growth when paired with market economies and the rule of law. Medellin itself is a testament to our hemisphere's potential when good governance and sound economic policies are complemented by security. We cannot realize the economic and human promise of our hemisphere's youth when transnational crime, corruption, and narco-trafficking threaten their freedom, safety, and economic well-being.

We strongly support the Secretary General's call to reaffirm our commitment to combat transnational security threats, in accordance with the OAS Charter, the Inter-American Convention against Terrorism, and the Declaration on Security, including by demonstrating hemispheric solidarity with Colombia in its fight against terrorist organizations like the FARC.

Ensuring the hemisphere's security is a joint responsibility, and several nations are providing inspiring leadership. In Colombia, the government and military are courageously taking their country back from narco-terrorists. In Mexico and Central America, brave leaders are confronting gangs, organized crime, and drug lords who are destroying lives and public order.

What these democratically elected officials and civil servants do to strengthen the rule of law in Colombia, Central America, and Mexico benefits everyone in the hemisphere; and the United States is committed to supporting them. So when regional leaders proposed a broad agenda for cooperation against criminals and drug traffickers in Central America and Mexico, the United States readily endorsed it.

We call this agenda the Merida Initiative. With full funding, the Merida Initiative will provide substantial support over several years to train and equip Mexican and Central American law enforcement. We are committed to this initiative because no country in the hemisphere can be safe from organized crime, gangs, and narco-terrorism unless we are all safe.

Since that historic meeting in Colombia sixty years ago establishing the OAS Charter and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, we all have worked tirelessly to bring freedom, democracy, prosperity, and security to our hemisphere. We have sought to protect human rights and promote social inclusion. And over the decades, we have made great progress. Now, however, we are right to look toward the future, where the eyes of the youth of the Americas are trained. What they are looking for is exactly what we should be looking for: more economic and social progress; stronger rule of law; and, above all, a flourishing, all-inclusive democracy. With those objectives in mind, we will stay on the right course over the next sixty years and ensure that the hemisphere's future is even brighter than it past.