

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2017

**The President's News Conference With President Juan Manuel Santos
Calderon of Colombia**

May 18, 2017

President Trump. Thank you very much. It is a great pleasure to welcome President Santos to the White House. Colombia is one of our closest allies in the hemisphere, and today we reaffirm partnership between our two great nations.

President Santos and I had a very productive meeting, and we will continue to work very closely together to bring peace, safety, and prosperity to the hemisphere. Perhaps no area is really more important in terms of cooperation than our joint effort to end the terrible drug crimes that plague both of our countries.

Recently, we have seen an alarmed—and I mean really a very highly alarmed and alarming trend. Last year, Colombia coca cultivation and cocaine production reached a record high, which, hopefully, will be remedied very quickly by the President. We must confront this dangerous threat to our societies together.

Today I affirmed the United States willingness to assist Colombia's strategy to target and eliminate drug trafficking networks, illicit financings, coca cultivation, and cocaine production, of which there is far too much. The drug epidemic is poisoning too many American lives, and we're going to stop it many different ways. One of them will be the wall.

My administration is committed to keeping drugs and gangs from pouring into our country. Already, border crossings are down more than 73 percent. Secretary Kelly is with us; he's done a fantastic job. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. And in short, we have a tremendous group of people working with us in terms of ICE, the ICE patrol and the Border Patrol agents. They've done a fantastic job, and I'd like you to give them my highest compliments, Mr. Secretary.

And MS-13, likewise—a horrible, horrible, large group of gangs that have been let into our country over a fairly short period of time—are being decimated by the Border Patrol, by ICE, and by our incredible local police forces. And they are getting out of our country or, in some cases, going directly into prisons throughout our country. But they've literally taken over towns and cities of the United States. They will be gone very quickly.

I look forward to working with President Santos as we target drug trafficking. Both the United States and Colombia have strong law enforcement and security relationship. We've had it and especially over the last fairly short period of time. Together, we will continue to fight the criminal networks responsible for the deadly drug trade that our people have a really strong commitment to getting rid of, because they want a much brighter future.

President Santos and I also discussed the deteriorating situation in Venezuela, and it is really in a very bad state, as you see and as we all see through the media. The stable and peaceful Venezuela is in the best interest of the entire hemisphere, and America stands with all of the people in our great hemisphere yearning to be free. We will be working with Colombia and other countries on the Venezuelan problem. It is a very, very horrible problem. And from a humanitarian standpoint, it is like nothing we've seen in quite a long time.

The United States and Colombia are also strong economic partners, and we will continue to pursue trade policies that benefit both of our peoples. The nations' common goals of protecting our citizens, expanding opportunity, and confronting the drug crisis will improve the lives of our people and many throughout the region.

So many people are being so horribly affected by what's going on in terms of violence and in terms of drugs, and we're going to take care of the situation. And we've both agreed to take care of it strongly and quickly.

President Santos, it was an honor to meet with you and your entire group of representatives, very talented people indeed, who have been working with us and my representatives. And I look forward to many more productive meetings, such as the one we just had. I'd like to thank you very much for being at the White House, being our guest. And I'd like to congratulate you on winning the Nobel Peace Prize. That's a very great achievement. Thank you very much.

President Santos. Mr. President, I want to thank you personally for this warm and productive visit and for the strong support Colombia has received from your administration, from Congress, and from the American people.

[At this point, President Santos spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Santos. As you know, our nations have had for a long time a strategic alliance and extraordinary friendship. We believe in the same principles of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. And we work so that the Western Hemisphere can be more prosperous and safe.

The United States and Colombia, they're both democracies of greater—of longer standing in the hemisphere, we have supported each other. Our soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder in the Korean war. At the request of the United States, we sent antidrug experts to Afghanistan. And today, Colombia and the United States are working together to support Central America in their fight against drug cartels and the violence of organized crime.

I can say, Mr. President, based on our conversation this afternoon, that I have no doubt that the United States and Colombia continue to be, today, more than ever, a support, one for the other. Our alliance was strengthened. Our most valuable cooperation has been Plan Colombia, which I can sum up in very simple terms.

When Colombians were fighting to survive—for our democracy to survive, actually—faced with the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking, the United States stretched out a hand and helped us win that battle. We will never forget it.

Today, we live in a different country. Today, Colombia is a more peaceful society, a more modern and a fairer society. In November last year, we ended the longest and last armed conflict existing in our hemisphere. The guerilla is putting down weapons at this precise time to the United Nations. Insecurity has gone down significantly. Today, we have the lowest levels of violence of the last 40 years.

At the same time, we have had significant progress for our citizens on issues such as education, housing, health, and social services. Millions of Colombians have been lifted out of poverty. Today, we continue next to you as partners in Peace Colombia to consolidate peace in the most affected areas. With the robust support of your Government, we are removing thousands of antipersonnel mines that murdered and mutilated children, women, and soldiers.

We are healing the wounds of our victims, and we are embarking on a big social development program.

Such as we said today, we are working with your administration to take advantage of the unique opportunity peace offers so as to reduce permanently the production of coca leaf in Colombia and fight more effectively the other links in drug trafficking, including consumption. We must continue and deepen the fight against organized crime, transnational crime responsible not just for drug trafficking, but also for human trafficking and illegal mining.

Our shared agenda, framed within a high-level dialogue that we Colombians value so much, includes cooperation which has allowed us to have unprecedented progress towards quality education for everyone. And this is a priority in the policies of my Government, and we wish to do more with regards to innovation and technology.

With the active participation of the private sector, we have reached trade agreements, investment agreements that are mutually beneficial. This morning we established the entrepreneurial council between the United States and Colombia. We are and wish to continue to be the best destination in Latin America for American businesses. Colombia will continue to be very proudly a close friend and a strategic ally of the United States.

Dear President Trump, I hope you can visit us soon so that you can personally witness the transformation underway in our country. I hope to be able to welcome you to a Colombia in peace, a more equitable Colombia, a better educated Colombia that you have so much contributed to.

Thank you so much.

President Trump. Thank you very much. Does anybody have any questions? [Laughter] I'm shocked.

Jon [Jonathan Karl, ABC News], go ahead.

Q. Mr. President, thank you very much.

President Trump. Thank you.

Russia's Efforts To Influence the 2016 Presidential Election/Job Creation and Growth/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Q. I'd like to get your—Mr. President, I'd like to get your reaction to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein's decision to appoint a Special Counsel to investigate the Russia—Russian interference in the campaign. Was this the right move, or is this part of a "witch hunt"?

President Trump. Well, I respect the move, but the entire thing has been a witch hunt. And there is no collusion between certainly myself and my campaign, but I can always speak for myself—and the Russians, zero.

I think it divides the country. I think we have a very divided country because of that and many other things. So I can tell you that we want to bring this great country of ours together, Jon. And I will also say very strongly, we've had tremendous success. You look at our job numbers, you look at what's going on at the border, as we discussed before; if you look at what will be happening—you're going to see some incredible numbers with respect to the success of General Mattis and others with the ISIS situation. The numbers are staggering, how successful they've been, the military has been.

Tomorrow, as you know, I'm going to Saudi Arabia, going to Israel. I'm going to Rome. And we have the G-7. We have a lot of great things going on.

So I hate to see anything that divides. I'm fine with whatever people want to do, but we have to get back to running this country really, really well. We've made tremendous progress in the last hundred-some-odd days. Tremendous progress. And you see job numbers; you see all of the production that's starting. Plants starting to open again. Haven't been open in years. I'm very proud of it. That's what I want to be focused on. Because, believe me, there's no collusion. Russia is fine. But whether it's Russia or anybody else, my total priority, believe me, is the United States of America.

So thank you very much.

President Santos. [Inaudible]

Venezuela

[A reporter spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

Q. President Trump, President Santos, can we say that today we are setting a new roadmap in the relationship between Colombia and the United States? Which are the concrete commitments? You were talking about the postconflict time. Many funds are needed for that.

And on the issue of Venezuela, President Trump, many deaths, human rights violations. There's plenty to be done.

President Trump. Well, that's true. Venezuela is a very, very serious problem. We haven't really seen a problem like that, I would say, Mr. President, in decades, in terms of the kind of violence that we're witnessing. The President was telling me—and I knew—that Venezuela was a very, very wealthy country, just about the wealthiest in your neck of the woods, and had tremendous strengths in so many different ways. And now it's poverty stricken. People don't have enough to eat. People have no food. There's great violence. And we will do whatever is necessary—and we'll work together to do whatever is necessary—to help with fixing that. And I'm really talking on a humanitarian level.

When you look at the oil reserves that they have, when you look at the potential wealth that Venezuela has, you sort of have to wonder, why is that happening? How is that possible? But it's been unbelievably poorly run for a long period of time. And hopefully, that will change, and they can use those assets for the good and to take care of their people. Because right now what's happening is really a disgrace to humanity.

And, Jon, I think you also had a question for the President, if you'd like to.

Q. Does he have another one?

[President Santos spoke briefly in English as follows.]

President Santos. I answered his question about the commitment.

[President Santos continued in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Santos. The commitment on President Trump's side and his administration was shown through the approval of the budget that, for Colombia, means an increase in the support to fund the postconflict era. Last night we received from a very important organization, The

Atlantic Council, a report, which includes both parties presided by a Republican Senator and a Democrat Senator with a roadmap recommending the governments of the United States and Colombia to follow.

This morning we established this entrepreneurial council, United States-Colombia, so that the private sector can also have a voice in that roadmap. This means we are working together on every front that can be convenient for both countries. But we'll continue to work together. We have ratified that commitment today during our conversation.

And as I said before, we have the best of relations with the United States. We are strategic allies in the region, and we will continue to be so.

Mexico-U.S. Border Security

Mr. Karl. Thank you, Mr. President. President Santos, to you, you heard President Trump say that critical to stopping the flow of drugs into the United States will be the wall that he wants to build on the Mexican border. Do you agree with him? Would that wall be a step, a positive step and a step towards reducing the flow of drugs across the border?

[President Santos spoke in English as follows.]

President Santos. I believe that the best way to fight the drug trafficking is by collaborating. This is not a problem of Colombia only or a problem of the United States only, it's a world problem. And we have to all work together. We declared the war on drugs 40 years ago. The world declared the war on drugs. And it's a war that has not been won. So we must be more effective and more efficient.

Now, we are doing a very big effort, because of the peace process, to have a new strategy: carrot and stick. Stick, by forced eradication. We have already eradicated, this year only, 15,000 hectares, which is the whole volume that we eradicated last year. And we're starting to eradicate—to substitute voluntarily, through a program where the peasants—and we have 80,000 families already in the program—that they are going to substitute for legal crops. And this is the first time that this could be done because of the peace. Before, the conflict did not allow us to build roads and to give these peasants an alternative. Now we have. So we have to take advantage of this opportunity and continue reducing the production of coca.

In the meantime, we will work together, the U.S. and Colombia, with other countries—Central America—to fight the other links of the chain, the intermediaries. We have destroyed 22,000 laboratories in the Colombian jungles, seizing the cocaine in the transit. We have seized record amount of tons last year, and this year, we're doing even better than last year.

So by working together, we can be much more effective, and that is the commitment we just made or ratified this afternoon.

President Trump. And that was a long and very diplomatic answer to your question. *[Laughter]* I will say it a little bit shorter: Walls work. Just ask Israel. They work. Believe me, they work. And we have no choice.

Peter Baker *[New York Times]*. Yes.

Former National Security Adviser Michael T. Flynn

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. In the light of a very busy news week, a lot of people would like to get to the bottom of a couple of things, give you a chance to go on record here. Did you

at any time urge former FBI Director James Comey in any way, shape, or form to close or to back down the investigation into Michael Flynn?

And also as you look back——

President Trump. No. No. Next question. [Laughter]

Investigation of Russia's Efforts To Influence the 2016 Presidential Election/Former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James B. Comey, Jr./Health Care Reform/Job Creation and Growth

Q. Next question. As you look back over the past 6 months or year, have you had any recollection where you've wondered if anything you have done has been something that might be worthy of criminal charges in these investigations or impeachment, as some on the left are implying?

President Trump. I think it's totally ridiculous. Everybody thinks so. And again, we have to get back to working our country properly so that we can take care of the problems that we have. We have plenty of problems. We've done a fantastic job. We have a tremendous group of people. Millions and millions of people out there that are looking at what you had just said and said, "What are they doing?"

Director Comey was very unpopular with most people. I actually thought when I made that decision—and I also got a very, very strong recommendation, as you know, from the Deputy Attorney General, Rod Rosenstein. But when I made that decision, I actually thought that it would be a bipartisan decision, because you look at all of the people on the Democratic side—not only the Republican side—that were saying such terrible things about Director Comey.

Then, he had the very poor performance on Wednesday. That was a poor, poor performance, so poor, in fact, that I believe—and you'd have to ask him, because I don't like to speak for other people—but I believe that's why the Deputy Attorney General went out and wrote his very, very strong letter.

And then, on top of that, after the Wednesday performance by Director Comey, you had a person come and have to readjust the record, which many people have never seen before, because there were misstatements made. And I thought that was something that was terrible.

We need a great Director of the FBI. I cherish the FBI. It's special. All over the world, no matter where you go, the FBI is special. The FBI has not had that special reputation with what happened in the campaign, what happened with respect to the Clinton campaign, and even you could say—directly or indirectly—with respect to the much more successful Trump campaign.

We're going to have a Director who is going to be outstanding. I'll be announcing that director very soon, and I look forward to doing it. I think the people in the FBI will be very, very thrilled.

And just in concluding, we look forward to getting this whole situation behind us so that when we go for the jobs, we go for the strong military, when we go for all of the things that we've been pushing so hard and so successfully, including health care—because Obamacare is collapsing. It's dead; it's gone. There's nothing to compare anything to because we don't have health care in this country. You just look at what's happening. Aetna just pulled out. Other insurance companies are pulling out. We don't have health care. Obamacare is a fallacy. It's gone. We need health care.

We need to cut taxes. We're going to cut taxes. Forget what I want; it will be the biggest tax cut in the history of our Nation. And that's what I want. It's going to bring back companies. It's going to bring back jobs. We lost so many jobs and so many companies to countries that are not so far from you, Mr. President—they're very close to you, actually—and to many other places throughout the world. We're going to change that. We're going to have expansion.

We already do. You look at what's happening with Ford and with General Motors in Michigan and Ohio. You look at the tremendous number of jobs that are being announced in so many different fields. That's what I'm proud of, and that's what we want to focus our energy on.

The other is something I can only tell you: There was no collusion. And everybody—even my enemies have said, there is no collusion.

So we want to get back and keep on the track that we're on. Because the track that we're on is record setting, and that's what we want to do, is we want to break very positive records.

Thank you. You could ask a question.

President Santos. Ricardo.

[President Santos spoke in English as follows.]

Oh, sorry, you have another question?

Mr. Baker. For you—yes, sir, Mr. President. My question is, as someone who led a nation that's really done a lot of rebuilding and had to rebound from an epidemic of crime and drugs over quite a many years, what do you make of Mr. Trump's America first policy? And further, you've had a tough time with conservative radio, sometimes been called a punching bag. And you've said you have to persevere. I'm curious if you've given any advice to President Trump on how to do so.

[President Santos spoke in English as follows.]

President Santos. I don't think I'm in a position to give any advice to President Trump. He can take care of himself. *[Laughter]*

And what I—what we did in Colombia, you quite rightly mentioned it, is persevere. We—when you know your port of destination and we know—you know that you're doing the correct thing, you simply have to persevere. And that's what we've done in Colombia, and that's why we were on the verge of being a failed state some years ago. And now we're one of the stars of the region. And that's through hard work, perseverance, and clarity of your objectives. And that's what we have done, and we have to continue, because the trip is not over.

Ricardo Ávila [Portafolio].

*Colombian Peace Agreement/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)
Insurgent Group*

[A reporter spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

Q. Mr. President, I'd like to ask you about trade. You're about to start the renegotiation of NAFTA. And Colombia—and like other countries in the hemisphere—has a large trade deficit with the United States. Are you worried about the fact that that could contribute to increasing that trade deficit?

[The reporter continued in English as follows.]

President Trump, what is your position on the peace process in Colombia?

President Trump. Well, it's been a long process, and it's been a great thing to watch in the sense that the President did a fantastic job. That's not easy after so many years of war. So I'm very, very proud to get to know you, and I really congratulate you. There's nothing tougher than peace, and we want to make peace all over the world. And you are really a great example of somebody that started it.

I mean, FARC is—that was a long, tough situation, as you know very well, coming from the country. But I think the President has done a magnificent job. Not easy. But he's done a magnificent job.

[President Santos spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Santos. Clearer impossible. *[Laughter]*

On the trade issue, our deficit with the United States is not so large. It is a moderate deficit, which, of course, both countries will try to increase the volume of trade in both directions and investments also in both directions.

Colombia is becoming an important investor here in the United States, and this is something not many people know. But we have considerable investments in the United States.

We have attempted to give dynamism to these flows of trade, of investment, getting together those main players who are the investors in the private sector. I believe the foundations have been laid. We have the free trade agreement, which is working well. The number of Colombian businesses that are exporting to the United States has grown. And we both believe that we can take greater advantage of those agreements in order to increase flows in both directions for the benefit both of the Colombian and American peoples.

President Trump. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 4:04 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Secretary of Homeland Security John F. Kelly; Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis; and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her capacity as the 2016 Democratic Presidential nominee. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization. President Santos referred to U.S. Sens. Roy D. Blunt and Benjamin L. Cardin. A reporter referred to former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert S. Mueller III, in his capacity as Department of Justice Special Counsel to oversee the previously-confirmed FBI investigation of Russian Government efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and related matters.

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President; Colombia : Relations with U.S.; Colombia : Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) insurgent group; Colombia : Trade with U.S.; Commerce, international : Group of Seven (G-7) nations; Communications : News media :: Presidential interviews; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Drug abuse and trafficking : Interdiction efforts; Economy, national : Improvement; Elections : 2016 Presidential and congressional elections; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Homeland Security, Department of : Customs and Border Protection, U.S.; Homeland Security, Department of : Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S.; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Justice, Department of : Bureau of Investigation, Federal; Justice, Department of : Deputy Attorney General; Justice, Department of : Special Counsel; Law enforcement and crime : Gang violence, prevention efforts; Mexico : Border with U.S., infrastructure and security; Russia : U.S. elections, interference; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Terrorism : Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization; Venezuela : Political unrest and violence; Venezuela : Poverty and economic instability.

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