

The President's News Conference With President Francisco Flores Perez of El Salvador in San Salvador, El Salvador

March 24, 2002

President Flores Perez. Good afternoon. It is an honor for us to be here with you and to be able to answer the questions that you want to ask President Bush and myself. I would like to start by saying that for El Salvador, it is an immense honor to have President Bush in our land.

El Salvador has been a country that has faced enormous difficulties—the war, combat against poverty, earthquakes. And El Salvador has done this through a system of freedoms in the search of a democracy, the search of economic freedom as well—giving people the opportunity—the opportunity to get education, to trade of their products, and to integrate into the new world.

So a country like ours that believes in freedom feels especially honored to have a world leader that has built a leadership based on values and principles, values that have to do with the rights of human beings. And this allows us, countries that are so different like the United States and El Salvador, to find each other in a common point.

So welcome to our country, President Bush. It is an immense honor to have you here in our country.

President Bush. *Gracias, Senor Presidente, mi amigo.* Thank you, President Flores, for providing such warm hospitality in this beautiful country. Laura and I were struck, when we flew in, about your beautiful mountains and your beautiful sea. I'm honored to be here for the first time in my life.

We've just completed our fifth meeting—this is the fifth time that the President and I have met. And in each of them, I have come away from our meetings most optimistic about the future of El Salvador. I truly believe this country has got a unique President and a great President. El Sal-

vador—and the reason why I believe that is because of the success of the country.

El Salvador is one of the really great stories of economic and political transformation of our time. Just over a decade ago, this country was in civil war. For millions of Salvadorans, violence was a daily reality, and prosperity was just a distant dream. Today, El Salvador is at peace. The country has renewed its commitment to democracy and economic reform and trade. It is one of the freest and strongest and most stable countries in our hemisphere.

The United States considers El Salvador a close friend and strong ally. As friends, we come to each other's aids in times of crisis. Since September the 11th, El Salvador has been unwavering in its support for the international coalition against terrorism. I want to thank the President and the people of El Salvador for their prayers for the American people during this crisis. I want to thank you as well for ordering a freeze on suspected terrorist assets and for strengthening your border security.

And when the devastating earthquakes hit El Salvador last year, the United States immediately dispatched rescueworkers and relief assistance. We proudly contributed millions of dollars to El Salvador's reconstruction effort. And we will spend even more in the year 2002.

Our countries are united by ties of commerce and culture and kinship. The large number of Salvadorans who live in the United States make valuable contributions to our economy and send approximately \$2 billion back home to family members in El Salvador each year, *cada año*. Trade between our countries now approaches \$4 billion annually. That is up 140 percent. And trade means jobs. Trade means people who want to work are more likely to find jobs in both countries.

El Salvador is one of the really bright lights in Latin America. Many countries in this region have changed old ways and have found new wealth and new freedom. In this coming decade, El Salvador and the United States and nations throughout this hemisphere are committed to maintaining and extending this progress.

Greater trade can help us accomplish this goal. In January, I announced we would pursue a free trade agreement with Central American nations. And the President and I, after this press conference, will be having lunch with other leaders in Central America to discuss this very proposition. And we're also going to continue to pursue the Free Trade of the Americas, which aims to encompass the entire hemisphere in a free trade agreement. Completing these agreements will promote prosperity throughout the hemisphere and reinforce the region's progress toward political and economic and social reform.

I just met with two El Salvadorans, who are seated right here, who personify the cause of reform. One's an architect, and one's an economist. They are El Salvador's first two participants in the Americas Fellows Program. Soon, they will be coming to Washington to spend time working in the United States Government offices, where I believe they will acquire new skills and training. And they can bring them back home and share them with others. And thank you all so very much about participating in the program.

I'm also optimistic about this country's future. There's no doubt in my mind that because of this man's leadership, there are bright days ahead for El Salvador. And it's an honor to be invited here, and it's an honor to call him friend. And I want to confirm the fact that this Nation remains a strong ally with the great people of El Salvador.

Senor Presidente, gracias.

Questions.

El Salvador-U.S. Trade/Immigration

Q. Good afternoon, President Bush. Good afternoon, President Flores. As you said, I'm William Melendez from Channel 12, and I have the honor of trying to summarize the questions of all my other colleagues and the mass media of El Salvador.

Presidents, the benefits, the needed benefits of a free trade agreement can delay themselves, if we are not mistaken, to arrive to our countries, maybe 5, 6 years, because the mechanism is a bilateral mechanism, bilateral negotiation. And so the migration could continue working hard during that phase.

I would like to know, what will the treatment be of the United States of America for those fellow men of ours, so that they can regulate their migration status immediately? And besides, since poverty is the weakness, what conditions could be applied so that the countries, the poorer countries of our region, especially El Salvador, can optimize their resources and avoid that the states could become main allies of the economic oligopolies?

President Bush. A couple points. One, you're right, trade agreements sometimes take too long. And we intend to push as hard as we possibly can to get the trade agreement done. I was very serious when I announced the trade agreement, and we're going to work hard to expedite the agreement.

Secondly, the President made an interesting suggestion, which I will take very seriously. He said, "Make sure that a country is allowed to accelerate its moving into a free trade agreement." In other words, if the country meets conditions and—conditions of rule of law and private property, conditions that I'm confident El Salvador will meet early—let us make sure that if another nation hadn't met those conditions, El Salvador can ascend to the free trade agreement early.

So one way to cut the time is to analyze the President's request. It made a lot of

sense to me, and we'll take a good look at it.

There's no question there's a lot of hard-working Salvadorans in the United States. And the first thing I want to assure the people of this good country is that we want to make sure they're treated with respect. We want them to be—we recognize—I recognize that family values, something we talk a lot about in America, don't stop at the Rio Bravo.

There are people who care deeply about their families in El Salvador. They want to work. They're looking for jobs. And so the cornerstone of good economic policy, or good immigration policy, is to match a willing employer with a willing worker, to make that happen, to facilitate that arrangement. And that's going to be the cornerstone of immigration reform in the—as this issue comes up in Congress.

On the other hand, there are specific areas of immigration policy that affects the people of El Salvador, starting with TPS. My administration granted TPS last time the issue came up. And it doesn't come up until September, and we'll take a very hard look at it this summer.

And the second issue is a bill that's working through the Congress, introduced, if I'm not mistaken, by a Democrat and a Republican—one named Berman, one named Davis—that would grant the same status to Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, as those granted to Nicaraguans and Cubans. And we will take a look at that bill as well.

In terms of oligopoly, the best way to avoid oligopolies is to encourage open markets and competition. The best way to make sure that oligopolies do not dominate an economy to the detriment of the people is to do what the President's done: Insist that the markets be open; insist that competition allowed—is encouraged. And another way to enhance open markets and competition is through trade, honest, open trade.

And so that's what I've come to talk about today. And I believe President Flores is on the absolute right track to making sure oligopolies don't dominate this economy.

Ken Walsh, U.S. News, fine American. [Laughter]

Campaign Finance Reform

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, when you return home, new campaign finance legislation will be awaiting your signature. I wonder if you could tell us if you're going to—given your criticisms of campaign finance legislation in the past—if you're going to sign this bill reluctantly or wholeheartedly, what the impact you think will be on our political system, and how you regard the impending legal challenge to the legislation?

President Bush. I sign it—I have a kind of a firm, semifirm signature, as it moves across the page—[laughter]. I wouldn't be signing it if I didn't think it improved the system. And I think it improves the system this way: One, individuals will be allowed to contribute more to the campaigns. I've always been skeptical of a system where monies were put into the system where people didn't have a choice, whether it be a labor union worker or a shareholder of a corporation. Sometimes shareholders of corporations—they might make an investment for, hopefully, a good rate of return, and yet they wake up and realize that some CEO or somebody's made the decision to support a political party or a candidate not of their choosing. And I've always thought that the individual ought to have a choice. And so, therefore, the fact that the system encourages more individual participation, I think, is positive.

Finally, they've raised individual limits. I also think this will help challengers. And as much as I now love incumbency—[laughter]—I think it's important to encourage challenges in the system.

I am worried about some of the provisions; I stated so in my signing statement.

One such provision was that you can't—they're going to try to control who can participate in the election process in the last 60 days. And we'll see whether or not that stands up. I'm going to stay, by the way, totally apart from the legal matters.

One of the things I'm disappointed in the law is—and again, this may not stand a court challenge—but I've always thought that people who pump money into the political system—we ought to know who they are. I was a little discouraged—not discouraged—I was quite discouraged at the end of the 2000 campaign to see tons of dollars flowing into the political campaign at the last minute, on these so-called independent groups, and we didn't know who was funding them. And you know the kind of ads I'm talking about, scurrilous, untrue ads, coming into the campaign—a so-called front group, independent, and we don't have any idea who's putting the money in. And that's not good for democracy.

And so I didn't particularly appreciate the fact that this campaign bill didn't adequately address full disclosure. Now the excuse, evidently, was the courts won't allow it. Well, I would have liked to have seen them challenge the system, to see whether the courts might allow it now that we're going into the 21st century.

But nevertheless, the bill is a better bill than the current system, and I'm going to sign it. And there will be—I take it back; it will be a signature. I won't hesitate. It will probably take about, you know, about 3 seconds to get to the "W"; I may hesitate on the period and then rip through the "Bush." [Laughter] Thank you.

Free Trade Agreements

Q. Good afternoon to both Presidents. The first question is for President Bush, because we're talking about taking very seriously the free trade agreement with Central America. President, you're also saying and talking about openness. You said that we were going to eliminate subsidies, in the International Conference for Develop-

ment in Monterrey. But the market of the United States continues being a protectionist with your national—there are subsidies for agriculture. I don't know how much it would be willing—that is, your government—to eliminate these subsidies that are really disrupting the market of the small producers. And also, if the Senate is going to approve, in the short term, the permit to start the negotiations, because it also—the advancement of the free trade agreement will depend on this also.

President Bush. Let me just say one thing. Look, we buy more goods from all around the world than any nation. And of course, we're the biggest nation; we're the biggest market. But nevertheless, we buy billions of dollars of goods on an annual basis—billions. I think it's like 650 billion a year the United States purchases from countries. And Africa alone—we signed a free trade agreement with Africa, and we had a billion dollars of purchases last year, which significantly increased employment in Africa.

And there are some instances where we've got—farm policy, for example, where people—where the Congress has decided to fund certain programs. But this—our market is wide open. And by the way, anytime there's unfair trade, we will respond. And I have done so, and will continue to do so, because free trade must be fair trade as well. But I think if you look at the facts and statistics, you'll find that the U.S. market is one of the most open markets in the world, and we intend to keep it that way.

President Flores Perez. I would like to say the following: Never, never, in the history of El Salvador, El Salvador has had the opportunities that they have with the United States of America, thanks to the initiative of the Caribbean Basin. And never has El Salvador had the possibility of signing a free trade agreement with the United States before. So the possibility of openness that the region has with the United States has no precedent in the history.

Today, that we were flying with President Bush from the airport to this site, I was telling him what this openness is doing in El Salvador. And I was explaining to him that many women in the rural areas have opportunities to work today, thanks to that openness of the United States. And it is producing a dramatic change throughout the rural areas of our country.

Undoubtedly, the comparison between donated funds and trade is a comparison that is very different, because it is so much more important to have trade than donations. So in this sense, we believe that the focus of President Bush is absolutely true, that the only way to come out of poverty is through work. And the way to generate employment in our region is, giving the possibility of investment and work and labor.

Obviously, the agricultural topic is a topic—is an issue, but this has had an enormous advance for—

Q. [Inaudible]

President Flores Perez. —the Salvadorans and the region.

President Bush. Are you asking another question?

Q. Yes.

President Bush. Okay. What is it?

Q. Excuse me. My colleagues from Guatemala are asking that in Guatemala there has been the withdrawal of the visas to some militaries. And they want to know if this is part of the control or the enforcement of the improvement of economies that the countries are asking for.

President Bush. [Inaudible]

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, what is—

President Bush. Raise the mike a little.

Q. Don't think it goes that high.

President Bush. Okay. [Laughter]

Democratic Party's Radio Address

Q. What is your reaction to the Democratic Party using its national radio address to criticize you on foreign soil, saying you

made this trip to Latin America merely to pander to Hispanic voters?

President Bush. Wow. That was the ad?

Q. Yes.

President Bush. Or not the ad, but the—well, I guess I'd say, I'm disappointed. When I first got elected, I said, the best foreign policy for the United States is to have a prosperous, peaceful, and free neighborhood. My first trip as President of the United States, out of the United States, was to Mexico. And my longstanding interest in this—in Mexico and Central America is well known.

I firmly believe that the best policy for the United States is to pay attention to our friends, is to promote trade. Trade produces liberty and freedom. And sometimes in Washington, DC, people cannot get rid of old habits—which is petty politics, Mr. President. But that's just what happens. But people in America know that our administration is focused on what's best for America. And what's best for America is a prosperous and peaceful El Salvador, *y Mexico, y tambien los paises in Sur de América*. There is a great opportunity for all of us to be equal partners, to work *otros para todos los personas que viven in nuestros paises*.

Senor Presidente, *gracias. El honor es mio de está en este pais*. It has been my honor to be in this country. Thank you very much. We have to all work together to make this happen.

President Flores Perez. I just wanted to say, just to close this conference, that El Salvador, through myself, wants to express their profound appreciation to the United States of America for having accompanied us in so many difficult times. And this has to do with the leadership of President Bush. And Salvadorans want to recognize you at this moment.

And I would like to end by saying this—and this is very personal—I have had some honors in my life, but never had I had such a high honor as President Bush calling me his friend.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The news conference began at 1 p.m. at the Casa Presidencial. President Flores Perez and some of the reporters spoke in

Spanish, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter. In his remarks, President Bush referred to TPS, temporary protected status for immigrants.

Remarks at a Greek Independence Day Celebration *March 25, 2002*

Your Eminence, I can't spend enough time with you. [*Laughter*] I love your gentle soul, and I love your guidance and your advice. And anytime you want to come back, just give me a call. [*Laughter*] I'm so glad you're here. And I want to thank you all for joining us to celebrate this important day for Greece.

I want to honor the heritage of liberty that both the Greeks and the Americans share. There's no better place to do this than in the White House, the symbol of liberty and the symbol of freedom.

I want to thank the Greek Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs for being here as well. I appreciate you coming. I want to thank the Ambassador—the Greek Ambassador to the United States and the Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus to the United States as well. You all are welcome here. Thank you for coming. It's great to see you again. I'm glad to see Ambassador George Argyros is here as well. I never thought he'd get through the confirmation process. [*Laughter*] But he is my Ambassador to Spain and is doing a very fine job. I appreciate so much the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, George Tenet, for being here as well.

One hundred and eighty one years ago, our Nation supported the cause of Greek independence. And we have admired the progress Greece has made since. Yet well before we recognized the independence of modern Greece, the Greek heritage had a great impact on American independence. Many of America's founders knew Greek

history better than our own. They drew on Greece's political heritage in framing our Constitution. America's love for liberty has deep roots in the spirit of Greece.

The spirit of liberty has always had enemies. It's important for us to remember our history, that there are some who can't stand liberty and freedom, as we learned so tragically on September the 11th. The terrorists who attack us hate the very idea of human freedom. They cannot stand the thought of freedom of religion. It must make them very nervous to know that a Methodist is standing next to His Eminence—[*laughter*]—in a free society, in a society that welcomes people to worship freely and as they so choose. They hate freedom of speech. They can't stand the thought of people speaking their minds. They hate our system.

They also thought we were weak and soft. And they're wrong, and they're learning it every day. They learned it in Afghanistan, where we went into that country not to seek revenge but to seek justice. And this weekend, little girls went to school for the first time—some little girls went to school for the first time in Afghanistan, showing the world that we didn't go into Afghanistan as conquerors but as liberators.

And they're going to find out how tough we are. Because I want to assure you all that we're going to hunt them down one by one until our homeland is secure, until freedom is secure, to make sure our children and our grandchildren can live in a free and peaceful world.