

Remarks to the Council of the Americas May 7, 2008

Thank you all. Please be seated. Bill, thank you for the kind introduction. Thanks for giving me a chance to come by and see that the Secretary of State's dining room is a lot better than the President's dining room. [Laughter] I'm honored to be here. I'm pleased to be with the Council of Americas again. I appreciate what you do to promote personal and economic freedom throughout the region, throughout the Americas. I appreciate your strong concern about the need for liberty to be spread, liberty in forms of government and liberty in forms of economies.

I am honored to be here with the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, better known in the neighborhood as *Senorita Arroz*. [Laughter] I'm pleased to be with Carlos Gutierrez, the Secretary of Commerce, Susan Schwab, the U.S. Trade Representative. I'm thrilled to be here with Susan Segal, the president and CEO of the Council of Americas; a dear family friend, former member of the Cabinet of—in 41, Robert Mosbacher; Mack McLarty as well—people who care a lot about the region. Thank you for joining us here. I'm also pleased to be here with Ministers, representatives, Ambassadors from the Governments of Canada, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. Honored you all are here.

The foundation of a good foreign policy is good relations with your neighbors. A peaceful and secure neighborhood is in the interest of the United States of America. And so I want to talk to you about the hemisphere we share, the challenges we face, and the aggressive work that the United States is doing to help make the Americas a place of hope and liberty.

In recent decades, there have been positive developments in Latin America. Countries have moved away from an era of dictatorships, era of civil strife. Unfortunately, today, some countries in the region are see-

ing a resurgence of radicalism and instability. And one nation in the region remains mired in the tyranny of a bygone era, and that is Cuba.

Yesterday I had a fascinating opportunity to speak with a leading Cuban dissident, a former political prisoner, and a wife of a man who is held in a Cuban prison simply because he expressed his belief that all people should live in a free society. Video conferencing is one of the great wonders of the 21st century. And to be able to sit in the White House and talk to these three brave souls in Havana was an inspiring moment for me. It reminded me about how much work the United States has to do to help the people in Cuba realize the blessings of liberty.

It also reminded me of a couple of things: One, that there's an eternal truth when it comes to freedom; that there is an Almighty, and a gift of that Almighty to every man, woman, and child, whether they be American, *Cubano*, or anywhere else, is freedom; and that it's going to take the courage and determination of individuals such as the three I met with to help inspire the island to embrace freedom.

The Cuban Government recently announced a change at the top. Some in the world marveled that perhaps change is on its way. That's not how I view it. Until there's a change of heart and a change of compassion and a change of how the Cuban Government treats its people, there's no change at all. The regime has made empty gestures at reform, but Cuba is still ruled by the same group that has oppressed the Cuban people for almost half a century. Cuba will not be a land of liberty so long as free expression is punished and free speech can take place only in hushed whispers and silent prayers. And Cuba will not become a place of prosperity just by

easing restrictions on the sale of products that the average Cuban cannot afford.

If Cuba wants to join the community of civilized nations, then Cuba's rulers must begin a process of peaceful democratic change. And the first step must be to release all political prisoners. They must respect the human rights in word and in deed. And they must allow what the Cuban people have desired for generations: to pick their own leaders in free and fair elections. This is the policy of the United States, and it must not change until the people of Cuba are free.

We will face other challenges in the hemisphere as well. I'm deeply concerned about the challenge of illicit drug trade. First, I fully understand that when there is demand, there will be supply. And the United States of America is implementing a strategy to reduce—a comprehensive strategy to convince our people to stop using illegal drugs. I talk to my counterparts all the time in the region. And I talk about how we can work together—and I'll explain some strategies here in a minute—but I also remind them that so long as the United States uses illegal drugs, you know, drug dealers will find a way to get their products here.

We made some progress on reducing demand. Since 2001, the rate of drug use among the young has dropped by 24 percent. Young people's use of marijuana is down by 25 percent. The use of ecstasy has dropped by more than 50 percent. Methamphetamine use is down by 64 percent. Overall, it's estimated that 860,000 fewer young people in America are using drugs today than when we began. But obviously, we still have a lot of work to do. And so my commitment to our friends in the neighborhood is, the United States will continue to implement its comprehensive strategy to do our part to reduce demand for illegal drugs.

Secondly, we're working to intercept illegal drugs before they reach our citizens. Every day, the men and women of the

DEA, the Coast Guard, the Border Patrol, and other law enforcement organizations are working tirelessly to intercept drugs, to stop money laundering, and to bust the gangs that are spreading this poison throughout our society. We've had some success. We've seized record amounts of cocaine coming into the United States. Last year, these efforts resulted in a significant disruption of the availability of cocaine in 38 major cities. We still have more work to do.

And a final leg of our strategy is this: We will work with our partners, Mexico and the countries of Central America, to take on the international drug trade. I am deeply concerned about how lethal and how brutal these drug lords are. I have watched with admiration how President Calderon has taken a firm hand in making sure his society is free of these drug lords. And the tougher Mexico gets, the more likely it is they—these drug families and these kingpins—will try to find safe haven in Central America.

And that is why I committed my administration to the Merida Initiative. It's a partnership, a cooperative partnership with Mexico and Central America that will help them deal with the scourge of these unbelievably wealthy and unbelievably violent drug kingpins. And I want to work with Congress to make sure that, one, they fully pass our requests in the upcoming supplemental debate, and also remind Members of Congress that the strategy that we have put forth is a strategy designed with the leadership of the Central American countries as well as with Mexico. It's a strategy designed to be effective. And so when Congress passes our supplemental request, they also got to make sure that they implement the strategy we proposed in full.

Another challenge is to—promoting social justice in the region. Nearly one out of four people in Latin America lives on \$2 a day. Children never finish grade school. Mothers have trouble finding a doctor. In the age of growing prosperity and

abundance, this is a problem that the United States must take seriously. As the most prosperous country in the world, the United States is reaching out to help our partners improve the lives of their citizens.

Social justice requires access to decent health care. And so we're helping meet health care needs in some of the most remote parts of Latin America, primarily by using the United States military's medical personnel to treat local citizens.

I'll never forget going to Guatemala and seeing the clinics run by our troops. America is a compassionate country. We're plenty strong when we need to be. But our military has provided unbelievably good care for a lot of people who have never seen health care before. The missions last year provided treatment for 340,000 individuals in 15 countries. And this year, a new series of humanitarian assistant missions will treat an additional 320,000. I mean, it's so important when people think of America and think of the neighborhood that they understand social justice is at the forefront of our agenda.

Social justice requires access to decent education as well. And since 2004, the taxpayers of the United States have provided more than \$300 million for education programs throughout the region, with a special emphasis, a special focus, on rural and marginalized populations.

Last year as well, the Secretary and I announced a new partnership for Latin American youth to help train thousands of young people in the Americas with their English and to provide opportunity to study here in the United States. And the reason why is simple: We want people in our neighborhood to have the skills necessary to take advantage of the opportunities of the 21st century. It's in the interest of the United States that we promote good health policies and good education policies.

Social justice also requires institutions that are fair, effective, and free of corruption. It's hard to have a hopeful society when leadership steals the taxpayers'

money. It's hard to have a hopeful place when the people aren't comfortable with the nature of government. And so we'll continue our bilateral aid, and I'm proud of the amounts of money we're spending in the region. But we've also changed the way that we're providing aid by insisting upon rules of governance, rule of law, the education—the investment in education and health of its people, and governments to embrace marketplace economies.

And we do this what's called—through what's called the Millennium Challenge Account. It is a new way to say that, yes, we're going to provide taxpayers' money, but we expect something in return from the governments that we help. I don't think it's too much to ask a government that receives U.S. aid to fight corruption. A matter of fact, I think it's a request that's long overdue. I don't think it's too much to ask a government that we help to invest in the health and education of their children. Nor do I think it's too much to ask for a government to accept marketplace economics.

The Millennium Challenge Account has invested \$930 million in the—our region thus far to assist the countries of El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru. And let me talk about just some of the initiatives to give you a sense for the types of programs we're talking about.

In Honduras, the United States is providing assistance to nearly 1,300 farmers so they can develop their farmland and provide for their families. In Nicaragua, we've helped small farmers and entrepreneurs increase their productivity in rural communities. In Paraguay, we're working to—with local leaders to reduce the cost of starting new businesses.

See, the whole purpose is to encourage enterprise, infrastructure that'll help people get goods to markets; to provide the capacity—increase the capacity of these countries to be able to provide hope for their people.

This is a really good program, and the Congress needs to fully fund it as they debate the appropriations bills this year.

The Millennium Challenge Account is one way to promote prosperity, but perhaps the most—not perhaps—the most effective way is through trade. Trade brings increased economic opportunities to both the people of Latin America and the people of the United States.

Congress recognized these opportunities. I mean, Congress took a look at whether or not we ought to have free trade agreements in our neighborhood, and they started doing so with Peru. And the bill, thankfully—the trade bill with Peru passed by a large bipartisan majority. It's a good agreement. It's good for Peru; it also happens to be good for the United States. And now my call on Congress is to take that same spirit by which they passed the Peruvian trade agreement and do the same thing for Colombia and Panama.

About 17 months ago, the United States signed a free trade agreement with Colombia. Ever since, my administration has worked closely with Congress to seek a bipartisan path for considering this agreement. I understand trade votes are hard. And that's why we continually reached out with—to Congress. We've had more than 400 consultations, meetings, and calls. We've led trips to Colombia for more than 50 Members of Congress. We've worked closely with congressional leaders from both parties. We've responded to concerns over labor and environmental standards by including some of the most rigorous protections of any trade agreement in the history of the United States. We have bent over backwards to work with members from both parties on the Hill.

And despite this, Congress has refused to act. One month ago, I sent the bill to implement the agreement to the Congress. Yet the Speaker chose to block it instead of giving it an up-or-down vote that the Congress had committed to. Her action is unprecedented. It is extremely unfortunate.

I hope the Speaker is going to change her mind. I hope you help her to change her mind. If she doesn't, the agreement is dead, and this will be bad for our workers, our businesses, and it'll be bad for America's national security.

Approving the agreement would strengthen our economy. Today, almost all of Colombia's exports enter the United States duty free. Yet American products exported to Colombia face tariffs of up to 35 percent for nonagricultural goods and much higher for many agricultural products. Think about that. They export into the United States duty free, and we don't have the same advantage. I would call that a one-sided economic agreement.

Failure to pass the free trade agreement, therefore, is making it much harder to sell our products into Colombia. To try to put this in perspective for you: This weekend we reached an unfortunate milestone when the tariffs imposed on U.S. exports to Colombia reached an estimated \$1 billion since the free trade agreement was signed. There's a—that's 1 billion good reasons why the United States Congress ought to pass this bill. Passing the agreement, we could create the—[*applause*].

Members of Congress need to think about this. Once implemented, the Colombia free trade agreement would immediately eliminate tariffs on more than 80 percent of American exports of industrial and consumer goods. Many American exports of agriculture and construction equipment, aircraft and auto parts, and medical and scientific equipment would immediately enter Colombia duty free. So would farm exports like high-quality beef and cotton and wheat and soybeans and fruit. And eventually, the agreement would eliminate all tariffs on U.S. goods and services.

Opening markets is especially important during this time of economic uncertainty. Last year, exports accounted for more than 40 percent of America's total economic growth. Forty percent of the growth was as a result of goods and services being sold

from the United States into foreign markets. With our economy slowing, it seems like to me that we should be doing everything possible to open up new markets for U.S. goods and services. More than 9,000 American companies, including 8,000 small and midsized firms, export to Colombia. And approving this agreement, opening up markets for their goods and services, would help them increase sales, would help them grow their businesses, and would help them pay good-paying jobs.

If you're interested in work in America, if you're interested in economic vitality, you ought to be doing everything you can to make it easier for U.S. companies to be selling overseas.

And finally, approving this agreement is a urgent national security priority. Colombia is one of our strongest allies in the Western Hemisphere. I admire President Uribe a lot. He is courageous. He shares our values. He is a strong, capable partner in fighting drugs and crime and terror. The Colombia Government reports, since 2002, kidnappings in Colombia have dropped 83 percent, terrorist attacks are down 76 percent, murders have dropped by 40 percent. He's got a strong record of doing what he said he was going to do.

And despite the progress, Colombia remains under intense pressure in the region. It faces a continuing assault from the terrorist group known as FARC, which seizes hostages and murders innocent civilians. Colombia faces a hostile and anti-American neighbor in Venezuela, where the regime has forged an alliance with Cuba, collaborated with FARC terrorists, and provided sanctuary to FARC units.

President Uribe has stood strong. He has done so with the assurance of American support. Congress's failure to pass the Colombia free trade agreement has called this support into question. President Uribe told Members of Congress that approving this agreement is one of the most important ways that America can show our unwavering commitment to Colombia. Congres-

sional leaders need to send a message that we support this brave and courageous leader and that we will not turn our back on one of our most steadfast allies.

Yesterday I met with the President of Panama. I assured him our efforts to get the Panamanian trade bill passed will be just as vociferous and vigorous as our efforts to get the Colombia trade bill passed. Congress must understand: They have a chance to spread prosperity in our neighborhood; they have a chance to support friends in our neighborhood. And there's no better way to express that friendship than to support the Colombia free trade agreement, the Panamanian free trade agreement, and while they're at it, to send a clear message around the world that the South Korean free trade agreement is good for the U.S. economy as well.

The ties between the people of the United States and the people of Latin America are important to our country. They're important to our prosperity, and they're important to the national security interests of the country. We share a deep bond, a bond between friends and a bond between neighbors. And because of this bond, the United States will, and must, remain committed to making sure that Latin America is a place of opportunity, a place of hope, a place of social justice, a place where basic necessities like health care and education are not too much for any child to dream about, or a place where poverty gives way to prosperity, and a place, above all, where freedom is the birthright of every citizen.

I want to thank you for taking on the cause. I thank you for your vision. I thank you for your steadfast support of doing what's right in our neighborhood. And it's been my honor to come and share some thoughts with you. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:14 p.m. at the State Department. In his remarks, he referred to William R. Rhodes, chairman, Council of the Americas; former White

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House Chief of Staff Thomas F. “Mack” McLarty; Cuban dissident Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello; former Cuban political prisoner Jorge Luis Garcia Perez; Berta Soler Fernandez, wife of Cuban political prisoner Angel Moya Acosta; President Felipe de

Jesus Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico; and President Martin Torrijos Espino of Panama. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Message to the Congress on Continuation of the National Emergency Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting the Export of Certain Goods to Syria

May 7, 2008

To the Congress of the United States:

Section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)) provides for the automatic termination of a national emergency unless, prior to the anniversary date of its declaration, the President publishes in the *Federal Register* and transmits to the Congress a notice stating that the emergency is to continue in effect beyond the anniversary date. In accordance with this provision, I have sent to the *Federal Register* for publication the enclosed notice, stating that the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13338 of May 11, 2004, and expanded in scope in Executive Order 13399 of April 25, 2006, and Executive Order 13460 of February 13, 2008, authorizing the blocking of property of certain persons and prohibiting the exportation and re-exportation of certain goods to Syria, is to continue in effect beyond May 11, 2008.

The actions of the Government of Syria in supporting terrorism, interfering in Leb-

anon, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs including the recent revelation of illicit nuclear cooperation with North Korea, and undermining U.S. and international efforts with respect to the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq pose a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. For these reasons, I have determined that it is necessary to continue in effect the national emergency declared with respect to this threat and to maintain in force the sanctions I have ordered to address this national emergency.

GEORGE W. BUSH

The White House,
May 7, 2008.

NOTE: The notice is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.