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Remarks by John McCain on Cuban Independence Day

May 20, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain delivered the following remarks as prepared for delivery in Miami, Florida, today at 11:00 a.m. EDT:

Today, on Cuba's Independence Day, we have occasion to celebrate the rich cultural heritage and deep-rooted traditions of the Cuban people. Cuban Americans, many of whom have ascended to the heights of business, government, and the arts, have enriched and enlivened our country. In every field, and in states across America, they bring to our communities their custom of hard work and personal initiative. And for many of these patriotic individuals, while their lives and work are here in the United States, a bit of Cuba will always endure in their hearts.

So must it be for all Americans who cherish those freedoms we so often take for granted at home. For today is not a cause for celebration alone. Those inspired freedom fighters who secured Cuba's independence over 100 years ago could hardly know that their descendants would be engaged in a struggle for freedom and democracy a century later. And yet today, the Cuban people continue to live under tyranny, and their struggle goes on.

It is not a fruitless struggle, not by any means. One day, America will again have warm relations with a Cuban government that represents the sovereign will of its people, one that respects their fundamental human and political rights. One day, Cuba will be an important ally in advancing democracy throughout our hemisphere. Make no mistake: Cuba is destined to be free.

Today, as so many of you know too well, the situation is very different. Fidel Castro has passed the titles of power to his brother in a fashion suited more for a personal fiefdom than to a government purporting to represent that proud and dynamic people. A few recent news articles have labeled as "reforms" the smattering of small changes that have taken place since Raul Castro has formally taken charge. Such characterizations must sound quite cynical to the political prisoners that fill Cuban jails, to the millions who suffer under poverty and repression, and to all those who wish to choose their leaders, not suffer under them. The Castro regime enforces strict limits against freedom of expression, of association, of assembly, of movement, of speech. Last year, as many as 5,000 citizens served sentences for the vague crime of "dangerousness."

Yet tyranny will not forever endure, and as President, I will not passively await the day when the Cuban people enjoy the blessings of freedom and democracy. It is in our national interest to support their aspirations and oppose those of the Castro regime, one that harbors fugitives from U.S. justice, expresses unrelenting hostility to America, and shoots down unarmed civilian aircraft. I wish the other presidential candidates felt similarly. Just a few years ago, Senator Obama had a very clear view on Cuba. When asked in a questionnaire about his policy toward Cuba, he answered: "I believe that normalization of relations with Cuba would help the oppressed and poverty-stricken Cuban people while setting the stage for a more democratic government once Castro inevitably leaves the scene." Now Senator Obama has shifted positions and says he only favors easing the embargo, not lifting it. He also wants to sit down unconditionally for a presidential meeting with Raul Castro. These steps would send the worst possible signal to Cuba's dictators – there is no need to undertake fundamental reforms, they can simply wait for a unilateral change in US policy. I believe we should give hope to the Cuban people, not to the Castro regime. My administration will press the Cuban regime to release all political prisoners unconditionally, to legalize all political parties, labor unions, and free media, and to schedule internationally monitored elections. The embargo must stay in place until these basic elements of democratic society are met.

Maintaining the embargo is, however, just one element of a broader approach my administration would make to the people of Cuba. I would provide more material assistance and moral support to the courageous human rights activists who bravely defy the regime every day, and increase Radio and TV Marti and other means to communicate directly with the Cuban people. My Justice Department would vigorously prosecute Cuban officials implicated in the murder of Americans, drug trafficking, and other crimes. While our Cuba policy will not always be in accord with that of our hemispheric and European partners, my administration will begin an active dialogue with them to develop a plan for post-Castro Cuba, a plan that will spark rapid change and a new awakening in that country. The Cuban people have waited long enough.

As we work with our hemispheric partners, we must be clear about the kind of leadership America seeks to provide. For decades, in Republican and Democratic administrations alike, the United States has treated Latin America as a junior partner rather than as a neighbor, like a little brother rather than as an equal. As a resident of a state that borders Mexico, I am acutely aware of the extraordinary contributions that our neighbors make to the United States – from trade to culture to a commitment to democracy and human rights. Latin America today is increasingly vital to the fortunes of the United States, and Americans north and south share a common geography and a common destiny. It is time to embrace this destiny for the benefit of all our peoples.

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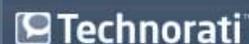


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We have made progress toward this vision by expanding the benefits of free commerce, through NAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement, and our free trade agreements with Peru and Chile. But the progress has stalled; our longstanding bipartisan commitment to hemispheric prosperity is crumbling. We see this most vividly in Barack Obama's and Hillary Clinton's opposition to the free trade agreement with Colombia. The failure of the Congress to take up and approve this agreement is a reminder why 80 percent of Americans think we are on the wrong track. Congress can find time to pass a pork-filled farm bill, but it cannot stir itself to support a key ally and further American prosperity.

The Colombia FTA would benefit American workers and consumers – the U.S. International Trade Administration estimates that over \$1 billion in tariffs have been imposed on U.S. exports to Colombia since the FTA was signed, tariffs that would be eliminated once the agreement takes effect. Here in Florida, trade has created new markets for the Sunshine State's world-class produce, manufactured goods, and professional services. Florida's exports to Canada and Mexico rose by some 208 percent since NAFTA was enacted, and its exports to Chile grew 99 percent in the first four years of its free trade agreement. Colombia today stands as Florida's fifth largest export market – Florida exported \$2.1 billion worth of goods there last year – and now the Colombians are offering to drop their barriers to American goods. Yet Senators Obama and Clinton oppose the agreement, wishing to retreat behind protectionist walls and undermine a key hemispheric ally.

The strategic implications of rejecting this agreement are profound. Colombia is a beacon of hope in a region where the Castro brothers, Hugo Chavez, and others are actively seeking to thwart economic progress and democracy. Delaying approval of the Colombian Free Trade Agreement will not create one American job or start one American business, but it will divide us from our Colombian partners at a time when they are battling the FARC terrorists and their allied drug cartels. It will undercut America's standing with our allies in a critical region and across the world, at a moment when rebuilding these relationships has never been more important. It will set back the goal of deepening relations with our neighbors to the south and enhancing the stability, peace, and prosperity of our hemisphere.

If I am elected president, the United States will not bow to the special interests seeking to block progress. Instead, we will forge a new policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean Basin, one founded on peace and security, shared prosperity, democracy and freedom, and mutual respect. We will work to prevent Venezuela and Bolivia from taking the same road to failure Castro has paved for Cuba, and we will broaden and strengthen ties with key states like Brazil, Peru, and Chile. We will make clear to all countries in the region that if they share our values of freedom and openness, they can count on us as a friend. We will not abandon our partners to demagogues, drug lords, and despair, but expand the benefits of security, trade and prosperity to all.

My vision embodies the interests and the values of America and seeks the betterment of all people, everywhere in our hemisphere. And it is a vision that includes the people of Cuba.

Courageous men found their calling at the beginning of the last century in winning for Cuba its independence. And those brave men and women who stand up for their rights today will, one day soon, win for Cuba its freedom. When they do, they will enjoy not only the fruits of their own liberation, but also the firm and fast friendship of all Americans who have stood with them throughout the years of struggle. On this Cuban Independence Day, let us take a moment to pray that Cubans everywhere can one day soon enjoy the liberty for which their forefathers fought.

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