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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Renewing U.S. Leadership in the Americas

Miami, FL | May 23, 2008

It is my privilege to join in this week's Independence Day celebration, and in honoring those who have stood up with courage and conviction for Cuban liberty. I'm going to take this opportunity to speak about Cuba, and also U.S. policy toward the Americas more broadly.

We meet here united in our unshakeable commitment to freedom. And it is fitting that we reaffirm that commitment here in Miami.

In many ways, Miami stands as a symbol of hope for what's possible in the Americas. Miami's promise of liberty and opportunity has drawn generations of immigrants to these shores, sometimes with nothing more than the clothes on their back. It was a similar hope that drew my own father across an ocean, in search of the same promise that our dreams need not be deferred because of who we are, what we look like, or where we come from.

Here, in Miami, that promise can join people together. We take common pride in a vibrant and diverse democracy, and a hard-earned prosperity. We find common pleasure in the crack of the bat, in the rhythms of our music, and the ease of voices shifting from Spanish or Creole or Portuguese to English.

These bonds are built on a foundation of shared history in our hemisphere. Colonized by empires, we share stories of liberation. Confronted by our own imperfections, we are joined in a desire to build a more perfect union. Rich in resources, we have yet to vanquish poverty.

What all of us strive for is freedom as FDR described it. Political freedom. Religious freedom. But also freedom from want, and freedom from fear. At our best, the United States has been a force for these four freedoms in the Americas. But if we're honest with ourselves, we'll acknowledge that at times we've failed to engage the people of the region with the respect owed to a partner.

When George Bush was elected, he held out the promise that this would change. He raised the hopes of the region that our engagement would be sustained instead of piecemeal. He called Mexico our most important bilateral relationship, and pledged to make Latin America a "fundamental commitment" of his presidency. It seemed that a new 21st century era had dawned.

Almost eight years later, those high hopes have been dashed.

Since the Bush Administration launched a misguided war in Iraq, its policy in the Americas has been negligent toward our friends, ineffective with our adversaries, disinterested in the challenges that matter in peoples' lives, and incapable of advancing our interests in the region.

No wonder, then, that demagogues like Hugo Chavez have stepped into this vacuum. His predictable yet perilous mix of anti-American rhetoric, authoritarian government, and checkbook diplomacy offers the same false promise as the tried and failed ideologies of the past. But the United States is so alienated from the rest of the Americas that this stale vision has gone unchallenged, and has even made inroads from Bolivia to Nicaragua. And Chavez and his allies are not the only ones filling the vacuum. While the United States fails to address the changing realities in the Americas, others from Europe and Asia – notably China – have stepped up their own engagement. Iran has drawn closer to Venezuela, and just the other day Tehran and Caracas launched a joint bank with their windfall oil profits.

That is the record – the Bush record in Latin America – that John McCain has chosen to embrace.

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Senator McCain doesn't talk about these trends in our hemisphere because he knows that it's part of the broader Bush-McCain failure to address priorities beyond Iraq. The situation has changed in the Americas, but we've failed to change with it. Instead of engaging the people of the region, we've acted as if we can still dictate terms unilaterally. We have not offered a clear and comprehensive vision, backed up with strong diplomacy. We are failing to join the battle for hearts and minds. For far too long, Washington has engaged in outdated debates and stuck to tired blueprints on drugs and trade, on democracy and development -- even though they won't meet the tests of the future.

The stakes could not be higher. It is time for us to recognize that the future security and prosperity of the United States is fundamentally tied to the future of the Americas. If we don't turn away from the policies of the past, then we won't be able to shape the future. The Bush Administration has offered no clear vision for this future, and neither has John McCain.

So we face a clear choice in this election. We can continue as a bystander, or we can lead the hemisphere into the 21st century. And when I am President of the United States, we will choose to lead.

It's time for a new alliance of the Americas. After eight years of the failed policies of the past, we need new leadership for the future. After decades pressing for top-down reform, we need an agenda that advances democracy, security, and opportunity from the bottom up. So my policy towards the Americas will be guided by the simple principle that what's good for the people of the Americas is good for the United States. That means measuring success not just through agreements among governments, but also through the hopes of the child in the favelas of Rio, the security for the policeman in Mexico City, and the answered cries of political prisoners heard from jails in Havana.

The first and most fundamental freedom that we must work for is political freedom. The United States must be a relentless advocate for democracy.

I grew up for a time in Indonesia. It was a society struggling to achieve meaningful democracy. Power could be undisguised and indiscriminate. Too often, power wore a uniform, and was unaccountable to the people. Some still had good reason to fear a knock on the door.

There is no place for this kind of tyranny in this hemisphere. There is no place for any darkness that would shut out the light of liberty. Here we must heed the words of Dr. King, written from his own jail cell: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Throughout my entire life, there has been injustice in Cuba. Never, in my lifetime, have the people of Cuba known freedom. Never, in the lives of two generations of Cubans, have the people of Cuba known democracy. This is the terrible and tragic status quo that we have known for half a century -- of elections that are anything but free or fair; of dissidents locked away in dark prison cells for the crime of speaking the truth. I won't stand for this injustice, you won't stand for this injustice, and together we will stand up for freedom in Cuba.


Now I know what the easy thing is to do for American politicians. Every four years, they come down to Miami, they talk tough, they go back to Washington, and nothing changes in Cuba. That's what John McCain did the other day. He joined the parade of politicians who make the same empty promises year after year, decade after decade. Instead of offering a strategy for change, he chose to distort my position, embrace George Bush's, and continue a policy that's done nothing to advance freedom for the Cuban people. That's the political posture that John McCain has chosen, and all it shows is that you can't take his so-called straight talk seriously.

My policy toward Cuba will be guided by one word: Libertad. And the road to freedom for all Cubans must begin with justice for Cuba's political prisoners, the rights of free speech, a free press and freedom of assembly; and it must lead to elections that are free and fair.

Now let me be clear. John McCain's been going around the country talking about how much I want to meet with Raul Castro, as if I'm looking for a social gathering. That's never what I've said, and John McCain knows it. After eight years of the disastrous policies of George Bush, it is time to pursue direct diplomacy, with friend and foe alike, without preconditions. There will be careful preparation. We will set a clear agenda. And as President, I would be willing to lead that diplomacy at a time and place of my choosing, but only when we have an opportunity to advance the interests of the United States, and to advance the cause of freedom for the Cuban people.

I will never, ever, compromise the cause of liberty. And unlike John McCain, I would never, ever, rule out a course of action that could advance the cause of liberty. We've heard enough empty promises from politicians like George Bush and John McCain. I will turn the page.

It's time for more than tough talk that never yields results. It's time for a new strategy. There are no better ambassadors for freedom than Cuban Americans. That's why I will immediately allow unlimited family travel and remittances to the island. It's time to let Cuban Americans see their mothers and fathers, their sisters and brothers. It's time to let Cuban American money make their families less dependent upon the Castro regime.



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I will maintain the embargo. It provides us with the leverage to present the regime with a clear choice: if you take significant steps toward democracy, beginning with the freeing of all political prisoners, we will take steps to begin normalizing relations. That's the way to bring about real change in Cuba – through strong, smart and principled diplomacy.

And we know that freedom across our hemisphere must go beyond elections. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez is a democratically elected leader. But we also know that he does not govern democratically. He talks of the people, but his actions just serve his own power. Yet the Bush Administration's blustery condemnations and clumsy attempts to undermine Chavez have only strengthened his hand.

We've heard plenty of talk about democracy from George Bush, but we need steady action. We must put forward a vision of democracy that goes beyond the ballot box. We should increase our support for strong legislatures, independent judiciaries, free press, vibrant civil society, honest police forces, religious freedom, and the rule of law. That is how we can support democracy that is strong and sustainable not just on an election day, but in the day to day lives of the people of the Americas.

That is what is so badly needed – not just in Cuba and Venezuela – but just to our southeast in Haiti as well. The Haitian people have suffered too long under governments that cared more about their own power than their peoples' progress and prosperity. It's time to press Haiti's leaders to bridge the divides between them. And it's time to invest in the economic development that must underpin the security that the Haitian people lack. And that is why the second part of my agenda will be advancing freedom from fear in the Americas.

For too many people in our hemisphere, security is absent from their daily lives. And for far too long, Washington has been trapped in a conventional thinking about Latin America and the Caribbean. From the right, we hear about violent insurgents. From the left, we hear about paramilitaries. This is the predictable debate that seems frozen in time from the 1980s. You're either soft on Communism or soft on death squads. And it has more to do with the politics of Washington than beating back the perils that so many people face in the Americas.

The person living in fear of violence doesn't care if they're threatened by a right-wing paramilitary or a left-wing terrorist; they don't care if they're being threatened by a drug cartel or a corrupt police force. They just care that they're being threatened, and that their families can't live and work in peace. That is why there will never be true security unless we focus our efforts on targeting every source of fear in the Americas. That's what I'll do as President of the United States.

For the people of Colombia – who have suffered at the hands of killers of every sort – that means battling all sources of violence. When I am President, we will continue the Andean Counter-Drug Program, and update it to meet evolving challenges. We will fully support Colombia's fight against the FARC. We'll work with the government to end the reign of terror from right wing paramilitaries. We will support Colombia's right to strike terrorists who seek safe-haven across its borders. And we will shine a light on any support for the FARC that comes from neighboring governments. This behavior must be exposed to international condemnation, regional isolation, and – if need be – strong sanctions. It must not stand.

We must also make clear our support for labor rights, and human rights, and that means meaningful support for Colombia's democratic institutions. We've neglected this support – especially for the rule of law – for far too long. In every country in our hemisphere – including our own – governments must develop the tools to protect their people.

Because if we've learned anything in our history in the Americas, it's that true security cannot come from force alone. Not as long as there are towns in Mexico where drug kingpins are more powerful than judges. Not as long as there are children who grow up afraid of the police. Not as long as drugs and gangs move north across our border, while guns and cash move south in return.

This nexus is a danger to every country in the region – including our own. Thousands of Central American gang members have been arrested across the United States, including here in south Florida. There are national emergencies facing Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Mexican drug cartels are terrorizing cities and towns. President Calderon was right to say that enough is enough. We must support Mexico's effort to crack down. But we must stand for more than force – we must support the rule of law from the bottom up. That means more investments in prevention and prosecutors; in community policing and an independent judiciary.

I agree with my friend, Senator Dick Lugar – the Merida Initiative does not invest enough in Central America, where much of the trafficking and gang activity begins. And we must press further south as well. It's time to work together to find the best practices that work across the hemisphere, and to tailor approaches to fit each country. That's why I will direct my Attorney General and Secretary of Homeland Security to sit down with all their counterparts in the Americas during my first year in office. We'll strive for unity of effort. We'll provide the resources, and ask that every country do the same. And we'll tie our support to clear benchmarks for drug seizures, corruption prosecutions, crime reduction, and kingpins busted.

We have to do our part. And that is why a core part of this effort will be a northbound-southbound strategy. We need tougher border security, and a renewed focus on busting up gangs and traffickers crossing our border. But we must address the material heading south as well. As President, I'll make it clear that

we're coming after the guns, we're coming after the money laundering, and we're coming after the vehicles that enable this crime. And we'll crack down on the demand for drugs in our own communities, and restore funding for drug task forces and the COPS program. We must win the fights on our own streets if we're going to secure the region.

The third part of my agenda is advancing freedom from want, because there is much that we can do to advance opportunity for the people of the Americas.

That begins with understanding what's changed in Latin America, and what hasn't. Enormous wealth has been created, and financial markets are far stronger than a decade ago. Brazil's economy has grown by leaps and bounds, and perhaps the second richest person in the world is a Mexican. Yet while there has been great economic progress, there is still back-breaking inequality. Despite a growing middle class, 100 million people live on less than two dollars a day, and 40 percent of Latin Americans live in poverty. This feeds everything from drugs, to migration, to support for leaders that appeal to the poor without delivering on their promises.

That is why the United States must stand for growth in the Americas from the bottom up. That begins at home, with comprehensive immigration reform. That means securing our border and passing tough employer enforcement laws. It means bringing 12 million unauthorized immigrants out of the shadows. But it also means working with Mexico, Central America and others to support bottom up development to our south.

For two hundred years, the United States has made it clear that we won't stand for foreign intervention in our hemisphere. But every day, all across the Americas, there is a different kind of struggle – not against foreign armies, but against the deadly threat of hunger and thirst, disease and despair. That is not a future that we have to accept – not for the child in Port au Prince or the family in the highlands of Peru. We can do better. We must do better.

We cannot ignore suffering to our south, nor stand for the globalization of the empty stomach. Responsibility rests with governments in the region, but we must do our part. I will substantially increase our aid to the Americas, and embrace the Millennium Development Goals of halving global poverty by 2015. We'll target support to bottom-up growth through micro financing, vocational training, and small enterprise development. It's time for the United States to once again be a beacon of hope and a helping hand.

Trade must be part of this solution. But I strongly reject the Bush-McCain view that any trade deal is a good deal. We cannot accept trade that enriches those at the top of the ladder while cutting out the rungs at the bottom. It's time to understand that the goal of our trade policy must be trade that works for all people in all countries. Like Central America's bishops, I opposed CAFTA because the needs of workers were not adequately addressed. I supported the Peru Free Trade Agreement because there were binding labor and environmental provisions. That's the kind of trade we need – trade that lifts up workers, not just a corporate bottom line.

There's nothing protectionist about demanding that trade spreads the benefits of globalization, instead of steering them to special interests while we short-change workers at home and abroad. If John McCain believes – as he said the other day – that 80 percent of Americans think we're on the wrong track because we haven't passed free trade with Colombia, then he's totally out of touch with the American people. And if John McCain thinks that we can paper over our failure of leadership in the region by occasionally passing trade deals with friendly governments, then he's out of touch with the people of the Americas.

And we have to look for ways to grow our economies and deepen integration beyond trade deals. That's what China is doing right now, as they build bridges from Beijing to Brazil, and expand their investments across the region. If the United States does not step forward, we risk being left behind. And that is why we must seize a unique opportunity to lead the region toward a more secure and sustainable energy future.

All of us feel the impact of the global energy crisis. In the short-term, it means an ever-more expensive addiction to oil, which bankrolls petro-powered authoritarianism around the globe, and drives up the cost of everything from a tank of gas to dinner on the table. And in the long-term, few regions are more imperiled by the stronger storms, higher floodwaters, and devastating droughts that could come with global warming. Whole crops could disappear, putting the food supply at risk for hundreds of millions.

While we share this risk, we also share the resources to do something about it. That's why I'll bring together the countries of the region in a new Energy Partnership for the Americas. We need to go beyond bilateral agreements. We need a regional approach. Together, we can forge a path toward sustainable growth and clean energy.

Leadership must begin at home. That's why I've proposed a cap and trade system to limit our carbon emissions and to invest in alternative sources of energy. We'll allow industrial emitters to offset a portion of this cost by investing in low carbon energy projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. And we'll increase research and development across the Americas in clean coal technology, in the next generation of sustainable biofuels not taken from food crops, and in wind and solar energy.

We'll enlist the World Bank, the Organization of American States, and the Inter-American Development Bank to support these investments, and ensure that these projects enhance natural resources like land, wildlife, and rain forests. We'll finally enforce environmental standards in our trade deals. We'll establish a program for the Department of Energy and our laboratories to share technology with countries across the region. We'll assess the opportunities and risks of nuclear power in the hemisphere by sitting down with Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Chile. And we'll call on the American people to join this effort through an Energy Corps of engineers and scientists who will go abroad to help develop clean energy solutions.

This is the unique role that the United States can play. We can offer more than the tyranny of oil. We can learn from the progress made in a country like Brazil, while making the Americas a model for the world. We can offer leadership that serves the common prosperity and common security of the entire region.

This is the promise of FDR's Four Freedoms that we must realize. But only if we recognize that in the 21st century, we cannot treat Latin America and the Caribbean as a junior partner, just as our neighbors to the south should reject the bombast of authoritarian bullies. An alliance of the Americas will only succeed if it is founded on a bedrock of mutual respect. It's time to turn the page on the arrogance in Washington and the anti-Americanism across the region that stands in the way of progress. It's time to listen to one another and to learn from one another.

To fulfill this promise, my Administration won't wait six years to proclaim a "year of engagement." We will pursue aggressive, principled, and sustained diplomacy in the Americas from Day One. I will reinstate a Special Envoy for the Americas in my White House who will work with my full support. But we'll also expand the Foreign Service, and open more consulates in the neglected regions of the Americas. We'll expand the Peace Corps, and ask more young Americans to go abroad to deepen the trust and the ties among our people.

And we must tap the vast resource of our own immigrant population to advance each part of our agenda. One of the troubling aspects of our recent politics has been the anti-immigrant sentiment that has flared up, and been exploited by politicians come election time. We need to understand that immigration – when done legally – is a source of strength for this country. Our diversity is a source of strength for this country. When we join together – black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and native American – there is nothing that we can't accomplish. Todos somos Americanos!

Together, we can choose the future over the past.

At a time when our leadership has suffered, I have no doubts about whether we can succeed. If the United States makes its case; if we meet those who doubt us or deride us head-on; if we draw on our best tradition of standing up for those Four Freedoms – then we can shape our future instead of being shaped by it. We can renew our leadership in the hemisphere. We can win the support not just of governments, but of the people of the Americas. But only if we leave the bluster behind. Only if we are strong and steadfast; confident and consistent.

Jose Marti once wrote. "It is not enough to come to the defense of freedom with epic and intermittent efforts when it is threatened at moments that appear critical. Every moment is critical for the defense of freedom."

Every moment is critical. And this must be our moment. Freedom. Opportunity. Dignity. These are not just the values of the United States – they are the values of the Americas. They were the cause of Washington's infantry and Bolivar's cavalry; of Marti's pen and Hidalgo's church bells.

That legacy is our inheritance. That must be our cause. And now must be the time that we turn the page to a new chapter in the story of the Americas.

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