



AmericanRhetoric.com

Barack Obama

Summit of the Americas First Plenary Session Address

delivered 11 April 2015, Panama City, Panama



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Let me begin by thanking President Varela and the Panamanian government for their leadership in hosting this 7th Summit of the Americas. Mr. President, to you and the people of Panama City and all the people of Panama -- thank you for your extraordinary hospitality and your outstanding arrangements.

I, too, want to express my thoughts and prayers are with the people of Chile as they're managing through a very difficult time. And I look forward to seeing President Bachelet at a future summit.

When I came to my first Summit of the Americas six years ago, I promised to begin a new chapter of engagement in this region. I believed that our nations had to break free from the old arguments, the old grievances that had too often trapped us in the past; that we had a shared responsibility to look to the future and to think and act in fresh ways. I pledged to build a new era of cooperation between our countries, as equal partners, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. And I said that this new approach would be sustained throughout my presidency; it has, including during this past year. I've met that commitment.

We come together at a historic time. As has already been noted, the changes that I announced to U.S. policy toward Cuba mark the beginning of a new relationship between the people of the United States and the people of Cuba. It will mean, as we're already seeing, more Americans traveling to Cuba, more cultural exchanges, more commerce, more potential investment. But most of all, it will mean more opportunity and resources for the Cuban people. And we hope to be able to help on humanitarian projects, and provide more access to telecommunications and the Internet, and the free flow of information.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We continue to make progress towards fulfilling our shared commitments to formally reestablish diplomatic relations, and I have called on Congress to begin working to lift the embargo that's been in place for decades. The point is, the United States will not be imprisoned by the past. We're looking to the future and to policies that improve the lives of the Cuban people and advance the interests of cooperation in the hemisphere.

This shift in U.S. policy represents a turning point for our entire region. The fact that President Castro and I are both sitting here today marks a historic occasion. This is the first time in more than half a century that all the nations of the Americas are meeting to address our future together. I think it's no secret -- and President Castro, I'm sure, would agree -- that there will continue to be significant differences between our two countries. We will continue to speak out on behalf of universal values that we think are important. I'm sure President Castro will continue to speak out on the issues he thinks are important.

But I firmly believe that if we can continue to move forward and seize this momentum in pursuit of mutual interests, then better relations between the United States and Cuba will create new opportunities for cooperation across our region -- for the security and prosperity and health and dignity of all our people.

Now, alongside our shift toward Cuba, the United States has deepened our engagement in the Americas across the board. Since I took office, we've boosted U.S. exports and also U.S. imports from the rest of the hemisphere by over 50 percent. And that supports millions of jobs in all of our countries. I've proposed \$1 billion to help the people of Central America strengthen governance, and improve security and help to spark more economic growth and, most importantly, provide new pathways for young people who too often see their only prospects an underground economy that too often leads to violence.

We're partnering with countries across the region to develop clean, more affordable and reliable energy that helps nations to combat the urgent threat of climate change, as President Rousseff already noted. Our 100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative is working to bring 100,000 students from Latin America to the United States and 100,000 students from the United States to Latin America. The new initiatives that I announced in Jamaica will help empower a new generation of young people across the Americas with the skills and job training that they need to compete in the global economy.

During the course of my meetings with CARICOM, as well as my meetings with SICA, as well as the discussions that I've had with many of you bilaterally, there have been additional ideas that we're very interested in -- finding ways in which we can expand access to the Internet and broadband; how we can structure private-public partnerships to rebuild infrastructure across the region; and to expand our commercial ties in a broad-based and inclusive way. Because I am firmly of the belief that we will only succeed if everybody benefits from the economic growth, not just a few at the top.



AmericanRhetoric.com

At home, I've taken executive actions to fix as much of our broken immigration system as I can, which includes trying to help people come out of the shadows so that they can live and work in a country that they call home. And that includes hundreds of thousands of young people we call DREAMers, who have already received temporary relief. And I'm remaining committed to working with our Congress on comprehensive immigration reform.

So the bottom line is this: The United States is focused on the future. We're not caught up in ideology -- at least I'm not. I'm interested in progress and I'm interested in results. I'm not interested in theoretic arguments; I'm interested in actually delivering for people. We are more deeply engaged across the region than we have been in decades. And those of you have interacted with me know that if you bring an issue to my attention, I will do my best to try to address it. I will not always be able to fix it right away, but I will do my best.

I believe the relationship between the United States and the Americas is as good as it has ever been. I'm here today to work with you to build on this progress. Let me just mention a few areas in which I think we can make more progress.

First, we will continue to uphold the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which states that "the peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy." I believe our governments, together, have an obligation to uphold the universal freedoms and rights of all our citizens. I want to again commend President Varela and Panama for making civil society groups from across the region formal partners in this summit for the first time. I believe the voices of our citizens must be heard. And I believe going forward, civil society should be a permanent part of these summits.

Second, we have to focus on reigniting economic growth that can fuel progress further in those communities that have not been reached. And that means making the Americas more competitive. We still have work to do to harmonize regulations; encourage good governance and transparency that attracts investment; invest in infrastructure; address some of the challenges that we have with respect to energy. The cost of energy in many communities -- in many countries, particularly in Central American and the Caribbean, are so high that it presents a great challenge to economic development, and we think that we can help particularly around clean energy issues.

We have to confront the injustice of economic inequality and poverty. I think that collectively we are starting to identify what programs work and which programs do not work. And we should put more money in those things that do work, and stop doing those things that don't. We don't have money to waste because of too many young people out there with enormous needs. I think President Varela is right to focus particularly on education and skills building. And this is an agenda which we should all tackle collectively.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Third, we have to keep investing in the clean energy that creates jobs and combats climate change. The United States is today leading this global effort, along with many of you. And I should point out that America's carbon pollution is near its lowest level in almost two decades. Across the Americas, I think we have the opportunity to expand our clean energy partnerships and increase our investments in renewables.

And finally, we have to stand firm for the security of our citizens. We must continue to join with our partners across the region, especially in Central America, but also in the Caribbean, to promote an approach, a holistic approach that applies rule of law, respects human rights, but also tackles the narco-traffickers that devastate so many communities. This is a shared responsibility. And I've said before that the United States has a responsibility to reduce the demand for drugs and to reduce the flow of weapons south, even as we partner with you to go after the networks that can cause so much violence.

So, a new relationship with Cuba. More trade and economic partnerships that reduce poverty and creates opportunity, particularly focusing on education. Increased people-to-people exchanges. More investment in our young people. Clean energy that combats climate change. Security cooperation to protect our citizens and our communities. That's the new chapter of engagement that the United States is pursuing across the Americas.

I want to make one last comment addressing some of the points that President Correa raised and I'm sure will be raised by a few others during this discussion. I always enjoy the history lessons that I receive when I'm here. I'm a student of history, so I tend to actually be familiar with many of these episodes that have been mentioned. I am the first one to acknowledge that America's application of concern around human rights has not always been consistent. And I'm certainly mindful that there are dark chapters in our own history in which we have not observed the principles and ideals upon which the country was founded.

Just a few weeks ago, I was in Selma, Alabama celebrating the 50th anniversary of a march across a bridge that resulted in horrific violence. And the reason I was there, and the reason it was a celebration, is because it was a triumph of human spirit in which ordinary people without resort to violence were able to overcome systematic segregation. Their voices were heard, and our country changed.

America never makes a claim about being perfect. We do make a claim about being open to change. So I would just say that we can, I suppose, spend a lot of time talking about past grievances, and I suppose that it's possible to use the United States as a handy excuse every so often for political problems that may be occurring domestically. But that's not going to bring progress. That's not going to solve the problems of children who can't read, who don't have enough to eat. It's not going to make our countries more productive or more competitive in a global economy.



AmericanRhetoric.com

So I just want to make very clear that when we speak out on something like human rights, it's not because we think we are perfect, but it is because we think the ideal of not jailing people if they disagree with you is the right ideal.

Perhaps President Correa has more confidence than I do in distinguishing between bad press and good press. There are a whole bunch of press that I think is bad, mainly because it criticizes me, but they continue to speak out in the United States because I don't have confidence in a system in which one person is making that determination. I think that if we believe in democracy it means that everybody has the chance to speak out and offer their opinions, and stand up for what they believe is right, and express their conscience, and pray as they would, and organize and assemble as they believe is appropriate -- as long as they're not operating violently.

So we will continue to speak out on those issues not because we're interested in meddling, but because we know from our own history. It's precisely because we're imperfect that we believe it's appropriate for us to stand up. When Dr. King was in jail, people outside the United States spoke up on his behalf. And I would be betraying our history if I did not do the same.

The Cold War has been over for a long time. And I'm not interested in having battles that, frankly, started before I was born. What I am interested in is solving problems, working with you. That's what the United States is interested in doing. That's why we've invested so much in our bilateral relationships, and that's why I will continue to invest in creating the kind of spirit of equal partnership and mutual interest and mutual respect upon which I believe progress can advance.

Thank you very much.