

**Address to the American Enterprise Institute
“The Organization of American States:
A Vital and Relevant Hemispheric Multilateral Institution”
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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good afternoon, friends:

It is good to be here with Peter DeShazo, who served as Roger Noriega’s deputy at the State Department, and Carl Meacham, who now has Roger’s old job at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And you all know that Roger is one of my predecessors, having served as President Bush’s first Permanent Representative to the OAS. This event is like a Washington version of “Six Degrees of Separation.” How far removed are you from Roger Noriega? But in all seriousness, Roger, thank you for inviting me and allowing me to participate this afternoon.

As for the question posed: is the OAS falling down on the job? The short answer is no. But I imagine that you would like for me to expand on that.

Let me put it simply: It is the view of this Administration that the Organization of American States has a critical role to play in addressing key hemispheric concerns as the premier multilateral political institution of the region. Substantiating this assertion are several facts, in no particular order of importance:

- i) President Bush has visited the OAS more times than any president in recent memory, including during his first few months in office, and he has continued to address the many important issues facing the hemisphere, including questions of poverty, excluded and marginalized populations, and the need to invest in people through education;
- ii) under this Administration, the United States hosted the OAS General Assembly for the first time in more than three decades;
- iii) Secretaries Powell and Rice have addressed the OAS on several occasions; and,
- iv) with the help of our friends in Congress, U.S. voluntary contributions to the OAS budget have increased under the Bush Administration.

The United States remains deeply committed to the success of the OAS in advancing our shared agenda to increase and enhance democracy, security, and social and economic opportunity in the Americas.

Let me begin with a brief observation which may surprise some of you – I think this is a significant and hopeful moment in the hemisphere. I think there is a lot of opportunity before us. I say this partly because we have an opportunity to build on last year's important engagement in the Americas by the United States. Building on that, I look forward to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States next month in Medellin, Colombia, and the 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago – whose theme is “Securing our Citizens Future through Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability.” I see 2008 as a year of deepening our partnerships in the region, and our engagement with the OAS in the Summits process clearly underscores this view.

What is at stake is the success of what I will call today our Pan-American Community -- the vision of a hemisphere of independent nations, living in liberty and prosperity and peace, which U.S. leaders of both parties have nurtured since the founding of our republic. So to understand the true value of the OAS, we need to step back for a moment and look broadly at our hemisphere.

The United States has always believed that our success is linked to the success of our neighbors. In a way, the situation in our region today recalls that of Western Europe in the last century, a time when old ideological conflicts had given way to growing agreement in support of political and economic liberty, a time when democracies were struggling to fight poverty and create lasting development. And most importantly, a time when we in the United States expanded our security, diplomatic, and development assistance, opened our markets and made a strategic, bipartisan, and sustained commitment to the success of our allies.

As I alluded earlier, my positive assessment of the region or the OAS might not be immediately evident when you read the press or listen to some TV programs and analyses, but I do think that the hemisphere, with the critical support of the OAS, has made real and tangible progress in recent years through the expansion of democracy, the rule of law and economic reforms. This is something we should commend. At the same time, we also need to rededicate ourselves to the challenges that still remain.

In recognition of what President Bush has termed “effective multilateralism,” the U.S. has been working alongside our hemispheric partners at the OAS to advance a shared vision where democratically-elected governments govern democratically and generate opportunity, and where the peoples of the Americas can reap the benefits of democracy.

Today we live in a region where all of the countries are democracies, except one: Cuba. The region has made a critical transition; it has become democratic and committed itself to a certain economic model. Nevertheless, we still face challenges – politically, democracy needs to be consolidated; economically, poverty, inequality and exclusion are still prevalent. One very significant example of how the region has sought to deal with these very real challenges in political and socio-economic terms is through the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Acting under the Democratic Charter, or in the spirit of the Charter, the OAS has helped and is helping those member states where democratic practices or institutions are challenged. It has

been actively involved in observing elections, mediating conflict, advancing promotion and protection of human rights, and advancing President Bush's regional Social Justice Agenda through its development and education-related efforts.

Here are just a few examples:

Haiti

When President Aristide resigned, the OAS was able to help ensure that the country had a constitutional successor government. Through the OAS, our focus has been on returning the country to full democracy at the earliest possible opportunity. The recent food riots that forced the resignation of Prime Minister Alexis, although now seemingly under control, very much alert us to the continued need for active engagement in Haiti by the OAS and other international actors to insure they remain on the path of democracy.

It is also important to note that our Western Hemisphere partners have provided approximately half of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti's (MINUSTAH's) military contingent, with a Brazilian Major General in command. MINUSTAH serves as a strong example of hemispheric cooperation to support democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Colombia

In Colombia, the OAS plays a critical role through the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (OAS/MAPP) by helping the Colombian government institute a transparent, internationally monitored peace process that results in a cessation of hostilities and the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of illegal armed groups as an important means of promoting human rights for all Colombians.

The OAS is also actively involved in assisting with the arduous task of reintegrating demobilized paramilitary members into society.

The OAS is also playing a key role in reducing tensions on the border with Ecuador. While we hope the border issue is on the road to resolution, important issues remain such as the security threat posed by narco-terrorist organization such as the FARC and its role in the region.

In thinking about the broader security and development environment in Colombia, I also think it is important to underscore the relevance of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which is currently before Congress. The successful passage of this free trade agreement is essential to our broader strategic and economic interests in the hemisphere, as well as our ability to sustain partnerships and maintain our influence in the region, which are critical elements in our work at the OAS.

Bolivia

The mediation effort by the OAS in Bolivia regarding the question of regional autonomy has been crucial to maintaining peace and democratic order.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, the OAS has worked to address the challenges to that country's democratic institutions. Has Venezuela's political polarization completely faded away due to these OAS efforts? No. Political tensions still exist, human rights concerns still abound – particularly in the area of freedom of expression – and the concentration of power within the Executive branch remains worrisome. But OAS member states remain engaged and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, in particular, remains vigilant – despite repeated denials by the Venezuelan government to allow the Commission to conduct a site visit. It is imperative that the OAS work to help Venezuelans strengthen and defend their democracy, under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Electoral Observation

The OAS has a longstanding and well-deserved reputation for impartiality and technical competence in the field of election observation. The OAS played a key role in the recent Paraguayan election and is playing an important observer role in this Sunday's elections in the Dominican Republic.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, currently chaired by U.S. citizen Paolo Carrozza, is often referred to as the “crown jewel” of the inter-American system. Our continued support for the Commission stems from our firm belief in the unique value and utility of the Commission as a defender of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Hemispheric Security

This is another area where the OAS has led the way in public safety and national security. These are critical elements in our hemispheric agenda to preserve democratic order and promote economic opportunity.

In 1999, the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE) was established to coordinate member states' activities against terrorism. CICTE seeks to strengthen border and financial controls, increase cooperation among law enforcement authorities, and address threats to airport, seaport and cyber security.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, OAS member states took the lead with dramatic and effective steps to coordinate the region's response to fight terror in the Americas. Less than a year later and facing a common threat to our security and prosperity, the OAS adopted the Inter-American Convention against Terrorism that expands our legal obligations to work together to both prevent and respond to terrorist actions.

On another front to secure our Hemisphere from new and traditional threats is the ongoing effort to combat drug trafficking and drug abuse in the Americas. Leading the charge is the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD).

In 1999 and as mandated by the Second Summit of the Americas, CICAD established a multilateral evaluation mechanism. The OAS has also produced internationally acclaimed model legislation on precursor chemicals and money laundering control. In addition, the OAS has been a leader in humanitarian mine action programs, in strengthening cooperation mechanisms through confidence and security building measures, and in the adoption of inter-American treaties on illicit trafficking in firearms and transparency in conventional arms acquisitions.

This year, we mark the 60th anniversary of the 1948 OAS Charter and the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, which was the first international expression of human rights, adopted even prior to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. As one of the oldest international organizations, it is appropriate to continually assess the role of the OAS. But it is also important to keep in mind that the OAS has been a pioneer in many fields. It was the first international organization to draft a convention to combat violence against women; the first to condemn the terrorist attacks of September 11; and the first to adopt an international convention against corruption in 1996.

So to conclude my brief remarks, and to echo the relevance and centrality of the Democratic charter, my view is that there is a strong and enduring consensus around democracy, social and economic development -- as well as free markets and economic integration in the Americas. This consensus is clearly reflected through the regional commitments through the work of the OAS, as well as in the Summits of the Americas process over the past 8 years. These now serve as keystones in our common approach in support of democracy and the benefits we all expect it to deliver.

We have a comprehensive agenda to improve conditions in the hemisphere within a framework of democracy, peace and security. The task then is how to continue to challenge and strengthen institutions like the OAS to serve, in line with President Bush's call, as a multilateral institution that is effective in addressing the world's problems. To do this means working with the OAS to make it a more powerful vehicle for positive change. Our engagement is vital to preserve the gains and achievements accomplished by the countries of the region. Does more need to be done? Of course. But the OAS is our pre-eminent regional political multilateral institution. There is no other body that brings all 34 democratically elected governments to the table or can match its record of accomplishments.

Our commitment to the OAS is also consistent with President Bush's policy of active and consistent engagement. The President has a solid record of building relationships with democratic governments -- left and right throughout the hemisphere. President Bush has made more trips to the region, and received more Latin American and Caribbean leaders than any other President in U.S. history. What's the point? The point is that this administration understands that to be influential in the hemisphere, the United States must remain engaged, and we need to be prepared to work bilaterally and multilaterally with our hemispheric partners to advance our shared hemispheric vision.

Thank you.

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