

Success in the Western Hemisphere

By Colin Powell

While we are justifiably focused on the challenges ahead in Iraq, a recent trip to Central America reminded me that great things are possible when good people stand together to defend human dignity and freedom.

Twenty years ago, Central America was in turmoil. Civil wars wracked El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Foreign-supported guerrilla movements on the left and death squads on the right terrorized the people of the region.

Of course, the United States did not shrink from this challenge to stability and security so close to home. We stood by our friends and the values we shared, advancing a policy committed to democracy and development. Some suggested that Central Americans were incapable of designing and implementing their own democracies. Our engagement was criticized by others as interventionist and unilateral.

Central America is familiar terrain for me. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I helped plan and execute *Operation Just Cause* in December 1989. Serving as National Security Advisor in the late 1980's, I was part of the effort backing Honduras against their Sandinista neighbors and supported the Nicaraguan Resistance – the Contras – whose pressure paved the way to free elections in 1990.

I returned to a very different Central America during my visit this week to Panama, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Free elections have replaced military juntas with civilian leaders, forced the Sandinistas from power in Nicaragua, and made Central America a safer, more stable neighborhood. Under Panamanian ownership, the Panama Canal is running superbly. With substantial U.S. support, democratic, accountable governments have undertaken substantial reforms, making their economies more efficient and their societies more just.

By no means is Central America out of the woods. There is too much poverty and – not coincidentally – too much corruption. There are too many weapons left over from the conflicts of the 1980s. Democratic institutions must be further strengthened to deal with such issues as the transparent administration of justice and social unrest. The good news is that democratically elected leaders are in charge in these countries, tackling the problems that matter most to their people, such as crime and unemployment. Countries that used to square off over border disputes have chosen to cooperate to confront threats to their regional security, such as drug trafficking and terrorism. They are working to make their economies more attractive to foreign investors, building a more educated workforce, and helping their rural poor take advantage of new economic opportunities.

The other good news is President Bush's intense personal interest in our own hemisphere. He is dedicated to helping everyone in the Americas who needs help. As he said in September when he signed the Free Trade Agreement with Chile -- our first FTA with a South American country -- "we are moving toward a great goal: a world that trades in freedom, in the Western Hemisphere, in Asia and beyond." And a world that trades in freedom is an increasingly prosperous world, and increasingly peaceful world.

We are close to concluding a free trade agreement with five Central American nations (CAFTA) that will help them expand and retool their economies for a new century. The commerce and investment generated by CAFTA – coupled with the economic and fiscal reforms spurred on by the negotiations – will create jobs and income in Central America for generations to come. We are providing assistance on a second generation of political reforms to aid in the fight against corruption. Our assistance to the security forces in the region is helping them to combat the scourge of narco-trafficking, join in the fight against terrorism and become better at protecting their own citizens against common crime.

So, it should come as no surprise that Honduran, Nicaraguan, and Salvadoran soldiers stand with us today in Iraq – serving with coalition forces to help the Iraqi people build a more just and peaceful future for their children.

Twenty years of experience has taught Central Americans and us that good people, standing together, can make a world of difference. That is a lesson well worth remembering.

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This article appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* November 12th. The American Embassy is authorized to release it to other newspapers for publication by them.