

99 - Address at the Teatro Nacional in San Jose Upon Opening the Presidents' Conference
March 18, 1963

[>> ESCUCHE AQUÍ EL AUDIO DEL
DISCURSO DEL PRESIDENTE KENNEDY](#)

Presidents of the Central American Republics, President of Panama, Your Excellencies, the First Ladies of the Central American Republics, members of the diplomatic service, the Archbishop, ladies and gentlemen:

I think the extraordinary statements which we have heard this afternoon will serve to illuminate for the people of this hemisphere, and particularly for the people of the United States, the harsh and striking challenges we face in these Republics and in the other Republics of this hemisphere in attempting to improve the life of our people. The statements that have been made today I think serve as a call to action by all of us, north and south, to move ahead in these days before time passes us by.

In 1825 a son of El Salvador, and a citizen of Central America--Antonio Jose Canas--the first minister accredited by the United Provinces of Central America to the United States, delivered an invitation to Secretary of State Henry Clay. He asked him to send representatives to the first Inter-American Congress at Panama, a meeting at which, he said, the struggling new nations of the hemisphere "might consider upon and adopt the best plan for defending the states of the New World from foreign aggression, and... raise them to that elevation of wealth and power, which, from their resources, they may attain."

Today, 138 years later, we are gathered in this theater in pursuit of those same goals: the preservation of our independence, the extension of freedom, and the elevation of the welfare of our citizens to a level as high as "from our resources" we can attain. And today I have come from the United States at the invitation of a Central America which, with Panama, is rapidly attaining a unity of purpose, effort and achievement which has been unknown since the dissolution of that earliest federation.

That early conference did not achieve all its goals. But from it flowed the dream and creation of Bolivar, Canas, and Jose Cecilio de Valle of Costa Rica--the dream which became the inter-American system and this system has been the most successful, the most fruitful, and the most enduring of international order in the history of the world.

We say this because every effort to re-impose the despotisms of the Old World on the people of the New has ultimately been beaten back--because within this system 20 Republics have attained the full recognition of their dignity as sovereign nations--and because this system has maintained an unmatched record of peaceful relations among its members. There have been occasional conflicts to mar this record. But nowhere else have nations lived as neighbors with so little hostility and warfare. And today the principles of nonintervention and the peaceful resolution of disputes have been so firmly imbedded in our tradition that the heroic democracy in which we meet today can pursue its national goals without an armed force to guard its frontiers. In few other spots in the world could this be said today.

We have not attained this strength by merely trying to protect what was already won, to preserve the gains of the past, to maintain the status quo. If these were our system's goals, it would inevitably have crumbled as old orders crumbled. Instead, it has survived, prospered, and grown despite wars and revolutions, despite changing ideologies and changing technologies, despite shifts in power and shifts in wealth--because it has been itself an instrument of change, profound revolutionary change which has molded the history of this hemisphere and shaped the thinking of men seeking freedom and dignity in all lands. As each powerful new wave of ideas and aspiration has swept across our shores, the inter-American system has been able to translate these ideas and aspirations into a working reality for our people. In this respect it has been unique among efforts at world collaboration. That is why it has endured in the past and must endure in the future.

In the first three centuries of our history, the seeds of Western civilization and culture were planted here.

In the next century, we established an inter-American system which helped to complete and maintain our freedom from foreign rule. This freedom has often been challenged--as today it is challenged in Cuba. But with the help of dedicated and brave men--men such as those who drove out Maximilian or men such as those who prevented the Spanish re-conquest in 1866, men such as Costa Rica's Mora, who helped to drive out William Walker--with such help we have destroyed all efforts at foreign conquest in the past, as we will ultimately triumph over the new conquerors of today.

In the 50 years following its creation, the inter-American system worked to establish the political equality and national dignity of all its members, to extend political democracy and to strengthen the principle that no nation should forcibly impose its will upon another. These goals have been largely met. The equality of sovereign states is accepted by all. Intervention and force have been renounced. Machinery of peaceful settlement has been strengthened. Democracy rules in most of our lands. It will ultimately prevail over the last vestiges of tyranny in every land in this hemisphere.

Now, in our own time, the inter-American system faces old foes and new challenges; and it is again demonstrating the capacity for change which has always given it strength. The foes are stronger and more determined than ever before and the challenges are more difficult, more complex, and more burdensome. For today we are faced not merely with the protection of new nations, but with the remolding of ancient societies--not only with the destruction of political enemies, but with the destruction of poverty, hunger, ignorance, and disease--not alone with the creation of national dignity but with the preservation of human dignity.

To meet this enormous challenge, the peoples of the Americas have fashioned an *Alianza para el Progreso*, an alliance in which all the American states have mobilized their resources and energies to secure land for the landless, education for those without schools, and a faster rate of economic growth within a society where all can share in the fruits of progress.

Here in Central America we have already begun to move towards the goals of the *Alianza*.

You have made enormous strides towards the creation of a common market of 13 million people. New regional institutions have been created; a central bank has been established; and centralized planning and direction are going ahead in education, finance, and many other fields. I congratulate you on your effort to reestablish an historic unity to meet new needs; and I pledge my Government's continued assistance to that great effort.

In addition, you have begun to formulate the long-range economic development plans essential to the success of the *Alianza*. The organization of the Central American Joint Planning Mission gives new impetus to planning on a regional development scale.

In nearly every country represented here, new land reform or tax reform programs have been adopted in an effort to meet the basic pledges of increased social justice contained in the Charter of Punta del Este and demanded by all of our people.

In the 2-year period beginning July 1, 1961, under programs supported by the United States as part of its contribution to the alliance, almost 3,000 new classrooms will have been built in the nations represented here today; almost a million new books have been distributed; and tomorrow we will begin to distribute more than a million more books to children hungry for learning. But much more remains to be done.

Some 7600 new homes will have been built during this 2-year period under *Alianza* programs in these nations--but much more remains to be done.

Three-quarters of a million children will have been fed, but many are still hungry.

Six thousand new teachers have been trained, as well as many thousands of agricultural workers, public health and other public administrators. Still more are needed.

During the last 18 months, almost 3 million people in Central America—farmers, workers, children, and slum dwellers—have received some form of direct benefit under the Alianza. And almost \$250 million of external resources have been committed in support of the alliance in Central America and Panama, to help strengthen the basic structure of the economy and at the same time meet the basic needs of the people for improved health, education, housing, and institutions.

Finally, a revolutionary worldwide agreement to stabilize the price of coffee has been entered into which we in the United States are determined to make work—to protect your most vital source of export earnings. As every speaker here today has said, every one of these countries sell their agricultural commodities in a sense at wholesale, and buy their manufactured goods at retail, and pay the freight both ways. And we are also willing to move ahead to agreements stabilizing the prices of other commodities, so that your future prosperity will not depend on the often destructive fluctuation of prices beyond your control.

Tomorrow, at El Bosque, we will see how the Alianza enters into the lives of citizens of Costa Rica—providing them with new homes in which they and their families can find decent shelter.

We shall continue under the alliance to build economies more balanced and less dependent on one or two export commodities. To this end we must push forward plans for industrialization, greater crop diversification, stronger educational facilities, and better utilization of our resources.

Yet we cannot be, and I know none of us are, satisfied with the progress we have made. Peoples who have waited centuries for opportunity and dignity cannot wait much longer. And unless those of us now making an effort are willing to redouble our efforts, unless the rich are willing to use some of their riches more wisely, unless the privileged are willing to yield up their privileges to a common good, unless the young and the educated are given opportunities to use their education, and unless governments are willing to dedicate themselves tirelessly to the tasks of governing efficiently and developing swiftly, then let us realize our Alianza will fail, and with it will fall the society of free nations which our forefathers labored to build.

Unfortunately, while this new endeavor goes forward we are also confronted by one of the oldest of our enemies. For, at the very time that newly independent nations rise in the Caribbean the people of Cuba have been forcibly compelled to submit to a new imperialism, more ruthless, more powerful, and more deadly in its pursuit of power than any that this hemisphere has ever known. Just when it was hoped that Cuba was about to enter upon a new era of democracy and social justice, the Soviet Union, through its Cuban puppets, absorbed the Cuban nation into its empire—and it now seeks to extend its rule to the shores of the continent itself.

But other foreign powers have discovered that the American Hemisphere is not a fertile ground for foreign tyranny, and that any effort to spread such rule will meet with fierce and unyielding resistance. For Americans will not yield up those freedoms which they shed so much blood to achieve.

At the OAS, at this meeting, and wherever Americans gather to consult about the future of their continent, we will continue to strengthen the structure of resistance to subversion. I am hopeful that at this meeting we will again increase our capacity to prevent the infiltration of Cuban agents, money, and propaganda. We will build a wall around Cuba—not a wall of mortar or brick or barbed wire, but a wall of dedicated men determined to protect their freedom and their sovereignty. And in this effort, as in all the other necessary efforts, I can assure you the United States will play its full part and bear its full burden.

In 1822, Bolivar, the father of the inter-American system, said this: "United in heart, in spirit and in aims, this Continent... must raise its eyes . . . to peer into the centuries which lie ahead. It can then contemplate with pride those future generations of men, happy and free, enjoying to the full the blessings that heaven bestows on this earth, and recalling in their hearts the protectors and liberators of our day."

My friends and colleagues; today we meet, representing seven of the great Republics of America, united in spirit and in aims. We are confident of our ultimate success in protecting our freedom, in raising the living standards of our citizens, in beginning a new era of hope in American history. Secure in that confidence, we, too, can look forward to other centuries knowing that our descendants may also gratefully recall in their hearts the "protectors and liberators" of our day.

Thank you.

NOTE: In his opening words the President referred to Francisco J. Orlich, President of Costa Rica; Miguel Ydigoras, President of Guatemala; Julio A. Rivera, President of El Salvador; Ramon Villeda, President of Honduras; Luis Somoza, President of Nicaragua; Roberto F. Chiari, President of Panama; and the Most Reverend Carlos Humberto Rodriguez Quiros, Archbishop of San Jose.