Americas Society,
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honor to be asked to speak here today, at the Americas Society, which since its founding almost fifty years ago has established itself, along with its sister organization, the Council of the Americas, as the premier inter-American organization in the United States.

Thanks to the vision and perseverance of your founder, David Rockefeller, and the leadership of your President, Tom McNamara, this Society plays a central role in fostering relations between the United States and Latin America, in shaping the direction for business and political relations within our hemisphere, and for offering a unique forum for leaders such as myself.

Such an opportunity is particularly welcome now, given the extent to which U.S.-Colombian relations have expanded over the last two years, as well as the rapid changes created by globalization. These economic and social changes require bold and concerted efforts by all the nations of Latin America.

This is particularly true in the wake of the first crisis of the globalized economy, where we are just emerging from the grips of recession. Growth that had contracted to barely 0.2 percent in 1999 will recover to a regional average of 3.9 percent, on par with figures from the European Union.

As you know, heads of state from around the world are meeting in New York this week, to open the first United Nations General Assembly of the new millennium. Under any circumstances, such an event would generate talk of new beginnings, talk of change, talk of new hopes and opportunities. We would also hear of dangers new and old.

This is particularly true today, and not because this is the year 2000. Such talk carries added weight because the world as we know it has changed, in some places dramatically, while in others it has just gotten underway.

I am speaking of more than the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of a bipolar, ideologically divided world. There is more to it, also, than the spread of democracy and free markets throughout Latin America and elsewhere.

What made the 1990s such a profound decade in the history of the world is, without question, the revolution in information technologies. It has changed much more than the way the world does business, but the way we lead our lives. Latin America is working hard to catch up with the enormous, indeed the revolutionary strides made here in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and Japan.

Perhaps the greatest global challenge we face is making sure that the “digital divide” becomes nothing more than an outdated slogan. Rather than a divide, we must ensure that all nations see this as a digital opportunity, and seize the day. This was one of the chief issues the leaders of South America addressed at our summit in Brasilia last week.

We talked of the need to better integrate telecommunications infrastructure throughout our continent, not to mention via our highways, bridges and river routes.

Equally important, as outlined in the Brasilia communiqué, is our understanding that drug-trafficking and related crimes threaten the integrity of the political, economic and social structures of all South American countries. Our communiqué calls for the shared responsibility among producing, transit and consuming nations.

Just as globalization is leading us rapidly towards greater integration and opportunity, so drug-trafficking stands as our hemisphere’s greatest obstacle to development, prosperity and peace.

Another positive outcome of the summit was securing critical regional support for the Colombian peace process, along with the recognition that a strong and stable Colombia is in the best long-term interests of us all.

These points were also emphasized during President Clinton's visit to Cartagena, just before the Brasilia summit. At the close of our press conference, the President made a plea to other countries in the region that have expressed concern of a spill-over of the narcotics trade into their own countries.

On the one hand, he assured them that the United States has the resources and the willingness to address any problems that may occur as we push to reestablish state control over southern Colombia.

On the other hand, the President made it clear that it is wrong that one country shoulder the entire burden and bear the entire brunt of the drug war. I made a similar argument in Brasilia – as I have for two years now – and will continue to push for greater regional solidarity.

President's Clinton's visit, which he made with the Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and other leading Republicans, also marked the culmination of two years of intensive work on the part of both our countries, as seen in the strong bipartisan U.S. support for Plan Colombia, in the form of a two year, 1.3 billion dollar assistance package.

Plan Colombia, you may recall, is <u>my</u> government's three year, 7.5 billion dollar strategy for peace, prosperity, and strengthening the Colombian State. It offers an integrated approach to the many challenges facing our nation, in particular with our need to pursue drug-traffickers more vigilantly, while offering alternative development for subsistence farmers, and working to modernize our judiciary and our Armed Forces.

A stronger Colombian State is critical if we are to advance as a nation, in terms of providing greater security and better protection of our citizens' human rights, as well as reaping the enormous benefits of the new world economy.

President Clinton's visit also afforded us the chance to address the economic side of our bilateral relationship in some detail. The U.S. government recognizes that support for Plan Colombia is but one aspect of a broader bilateral agenda. No equation is complete that does not include trade and foreign investment. And it is no secret that the region's most dynamic economy is also its greatest engine for growth and development. Without them, without opportunity and expansion, then our progress elsewhere will be limited at best.

We made it clear that my government is ready to expand and deepen Colombia's economic relationship with our largest trading partner. After all, 48 percent of Colombia's total exports go the United States, while 40 percent of our imports are of U.S. origin. In total, this accounted for 9.8 billion dollars in bilateral trade last year alone, not to mention 3.4 billion dollars in FDI stock.

Here, a wide range of avenues are open to us, some more immediate than others. Our first order of business is securing CBI parity for the Colombian apparel industry by the end of this year. Without it, we risk losing as many as 200,000 jobs.

Senators Bob Graham and Mike DeWine have introduced the Plan Colombia Trade Act, which would secure us parity for one year. This will give our apparel industry some immediate relief, while we enter into negotiations to extend the Andean Trade Preference Act, which expires in 2001. This would serve two important purposes: saving jobs in the short-term, while allowing us the necessary time to address other trade issues.

Still, to succeed, investment and trade must be supported by the steady pillars of a sound and stable economy, which was not the case two years ago. When I came to office Colombia was in the throes of its worst crisis in years, in decades even. The recession that began in East Asia and worked its way through Russia and Latin America had a devastating impact on Colombia, which was aggravated by a fiscal system that was out of control.

My administration has devoted enormous energy in digging us out of the recession and reclaiming fiscal solvency and our economic dignity. And the signs of recovery are strong. For instance, after a year of negative 5 percent growth – our worst figures for the twentieth century – it is safe to project from 3.5 to 4 percent GDP growth for the year 2000. Growth for the second quarter of this year was up 3.8 percent. Manufacturing has also risen sharply – up 12 percent from June of last year.

At the same time, the all-important construction sector was given a strong boost in late July, when the Constitutional Court approved my government's housing-finance bill. A continually competitive peso and low interest rates will continue to have a positive affect on non-oil export growth, and by the end of 2000 an upturn in private investment and consumer demand will begin to add to the stimulus of domestic demand.

A substantial boost in oil prices will ensure that we will be able to meet our overall fiscal targets for the year 2000. Not the greatest year on record, I grant you, but a dramatic improvement from 1999, lifting us out of the recession and restoring necessary confidence at home and abroad.

Equally critical to our recovery has been increased inter-regional trade, which in turn has led to more export diversification throughout Latin America – a trend that leaders across the continent will work to continue. Another important outcome of the summit in Brasilia was the pledge from the leaders of the nations of Mercosur and the Andean Pact to reach a comprehensive free trade accord before January 2002. Colombian trade with Mercosur rose by 88 percent over the past year.

Such gains also reinforce why it is crucial to continue towards our hemisphere's primary economic goal, as proclaimed at the first Summit of the Americas, in Miami in 1994, and endorsed again in Santiago de Chile in 1998. I am talking, of course, of the need to have a Free Trade of the Americas Act fully in place by 2005.

When put together – a well-managed economy along with efforts for further trade liberalization and regional integration – Colombia is setting a strong and steady course for its future. We are working to reclaim our position as one of Latin America's most respected economies, stable and prosperous.

We are determined to do what is still needed, both immediately and in the long run, to see that further vital reforms are passed, that our markets stay open and competitive, that we are able to bridge the "digital divide" and make the most of the extraordinary technological advances that continue to determine the way the world does business. Colombia's future as a vibrant actor in the world community requires no less.

If Colombia needs to recapture one necessary ingredient these days, it is optimism. This is what carried us through other difficult moments – the understanding that we are by and large able, honest, hard-working people who can and will build better futures for ourselves, our families, and for all Colombia.

I have no doubt that, if we continue on this course, Colombia will be in a much stronger position two years from now, just as we are better off now than we were two years ago. This is the result of sound strategies and tough choices, and I am excited by the prospects and heartened by our progress, and I am ready for what my next two years in office will offer.

Thank you.