



ALIANZA DE MESAS REDONDAS PANAMERICANAS
ALLIANCE OF PAN AMERICAN ROUND TABLES
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PAN AMERICAN DAY CELEBRATION, April 18, 2008
San Antonio, Texas

“OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES”

This is a very special day, since we are celebrating Pan American Day in the city of San Antonio, the site where our first Pan American Round Table was founded in 1916. I feel honored to have been asked to speak about our relationship with the Organization of American States (OAS) and I will do my best to leave you with a better understanding of what this relationship really means.

Going back a bit in history I would like to remind you that our Founder, Mrs. Florence Terry Griswold, was inspired by the basic principles of the Pan American Union, when she founded the San Antonio Table. In fact, she maintained close friendship with the Honorable John. Barrett, who was the first Director General of this notable continental organization, which in later years became today's OAS.

Based on these observations we can honestly say that our relationship with the OAS started at the same time that the San Antonio Table was born. This fact has been documented by many letters and official communications that have been published in the book: “The Pan American Round Table”, compiled and written by Lois Terry Marchbanks, a niece of our Founder.

Actually, we are here now celebrating Pan American Day, because the Pan American Union (now OAS) passed a resolution in 1930, stating that all of its member nations should celebrate such a date. However, it was in 1931 that Congress officially declared April 14 as Pan American Day and President Hoover delivered a speech, reaffirming the ideals of continental solidarity.

Before I start concentrating on our central theme, let me share one of my concerns: Everybody seems to know something about the United Nations, but not everyone is well acquainted with the OAS and its purpose. I will briefly point out a bit of its history, its structure and its role within the framework of the nations of the Americas. After all, it exists for the benefit of the citizens of our own hemisphere.

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THE OAS AT A GLANCE - (History, Structure and Mission))

The principles that embody the OAS grew out of a history of regional cooperation, dating back to the 19th century, as follows:

- In 1826, Simon Bolivar convened the Congress of Panama with the idea of creating an association of states in the hemisphere.
- In 1890, the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington, D.C., established the International Union of American Republics.
- In 1910, this organization became the Pan American Union, precursor of the OAS.
- On April 30, 1948, 21 nations of the hemisphere met in Bogotá, Colombia, to adopt the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) .Since then, the OAS has expanded to include the nations of the Caribbean and Canada.
- The transition from the Pan American Union to the OAS was smooth. The Director General of the former became the Secretary General of the OAS. He was Alberto Lleras Camargo, from Colombia. He served from 1948 to 1954.

Currently, all 35 independent countries of the Americas have ratified the OAS Charter and belong to the Organization. Cuba remains a member, but its government has been excluded from participation in the OAS since 1962.

The OAS brings together the nations of the Western Hemisphere to strengthen cooperation on democratic values, defend common interests and debate the major issues facing the region. It is the region's principal multilateral forum for promoting human rights, strengthening democracy, confronting shared problems, such as poverty, terrorism, corruption, etc. It plays a leading role in carrying out mandates established by the hemispheric leaders through the Summits of the Americas.

With four official languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, the OAS reflects the rich diversity of the peoples and cultures of the hemisphere. The member countries set major policies and goals through the General Assembly, which gathers all the Ministers of Foreign Affairs once a year in regular session. Ongoing actions are guided by the Permanent Council, made up of Ambassadors, appointed by each member state.

Secretary General, Jose Miguel Insulza, who took office in 2005, restructured the General Secretariat so the priorities of the member states could be addressed more effectively. Four specialized Secretariats coordinate OAS efforts and they cover areas such as: Security, Political Affairs, Integral Development and Finance. The Department of International Legal Affairs develops and implements treaties. There are other offices and agencies within the OAS, such as the Inter American Human Rights Dept. and the Summits of the Americas. There are also several

specialized units, such as the Inter American Commission of Women. The Educational Portal of the Americas is within the Integral Development Secretariat.

I have only covered a fraction of the framework of the OAS, but the idea is to understand that it is a well organized hemispheric body whose Mission is to safeguard the interests of each member state, respecting their sovereignty and promoting progress, democracy and peace.

As you well know, the headquarters of the OAS is located in Washington, D.C. The Secretariat, the Hall of the Americas and many other conference rooms and offices are housed in the main building, but there are other agencies and offices which function in other surrounding buildings, including the Museum of the Americas.

The OAS assigns representatives to each member state and these Ambassadors head the local offices of the OAS in each country. Thus, the OAS maintains presence throughout the continent and promotes cooperation at the local level. By the same token, each member state assigns a permanent representative to the OAS. These permanent representatives are Ambassadors who have to reside in Washington while their tour of duty lasts and they are very actively involved in the day to day business of the OAS. Currently, the US Permanent Representative to the OAS is Ambassador John Maisto.

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A VOICE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

All around the Americas, citizens are demanding a greater say in government decisions that affect our lives and governments are listening to those demands. This trend is particularly evident at the OAS, where civil society organizations have participated in dialogue on a growing number of issues. Civil society has played an active role in contributing ideas and recommendations to the Summits of the Americas process, to hemispheric ministerial meetings and to the OAS General Assembly.

The Alliance of Pan American Round Tables presented an application to the OAS in 2001 to be one of the Organizations of Civil Society (OCS) that could become registered by the OAS. Our application was accepted and we officially received our registration in October 2001. At that time, there were only 32 OSC which had been registered. Today, there are 320 and the number is growing.

Since 1944, when the Alliance of Pan American Round Tables was established, we have been an Organization of Civil Society, since we are non-governmental. However, the advantage of being registered by the OAS is that we can participate in hemispheric activities organized by the OAS, our voice will be heard and we can

contribute, with our input and our proposals, to raise the quality of life of our citizens. It is a relationship of mutual cooperation. It is not a one way avenue.

A fact to consider is that our registration is not a lifetime privilege. It has to be renewed every two years, by sending to the OAS a complete report of the activities of the Alliance, including a financial report. So far, as Chair of the Alliance-OAS Committee, I have been sending such a report and I hope that my successors will continue doing it, or else we will lose our OAS registration.

THE ALLIANCE-OAS LIAISON COMMITTEE

As soon as we received our registration from the OAS, the Alliance Executive Board decided to create a special committee which would serve as liaison between the two entities. I was appointed to chair it and Fabiola Chiriboga, from the Washington D.C. Table, was appointed vice-chair. The Committee became permanent at the Puebla Convention, in 2002. Since then, we have been functioning very actively with a Chair, a Vice-Chair, two members from the Washington, D.C. Table and one member from each Alliance Zone. As a matter of fact, our very able member from Zone I is Louise Actkinson, the Director of this San Antonio Table., who kindly invited me to talk to you today.

Since the members of our Alliance are distributed throughout the continent and we have Tables in 18 countries, it would be chaotic if we allowed free communication between any of our members and the OAS. In order to maintain a united front, all correspondence and communication is channeled through the Committee. So far, it has worked very well and I am happy to tell you that we have been able to earn the respect and appreciation of OAS Officials, CSO delegates and government or diplomatic personnel. I will expand on that topic later.

Several members have asked me such questions as: What do we get by being registered by the OAS? What are our contributions to the OAS? And most important: What is our relationship with the OAS? The latter question encompasses all inquiries and I will now try to give you an honest and very candid response.

To begin with, the truth of the matter is that years ago, the OAS never included civil society in any of their deliberations. It was unheard of and something that would probably cause resentment amongst the permanent representatives of the member states. The whole idea started at one of the Summits of the Americas, when a mandate to include participation of civil society was officially approved and issued. This mandate was reinforced at the Quebec Summit in 2001 and the ball started rolling, registration was implemented, and guidelines were written.

Our involvement and relationship with the OAS can definitely be considered as an opportunity for us to give, more than we receive. Obviously, by doing so, we have earned a good reputation within the OAS circles. Here are some of our activities:

1. We are cordially invited to attend all hemispheric ministerial meetings, where we can voice our opinions and offer suggestions. As a result, the Alliance has been sending delegates to many of these meetings in various countries. Of course, we select local members to attend, so as to minimize expenses and also, to expose as many members as possible to the experience. So far, members have participated in this type of meetings in: Venezuela, San Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Washington, D.C.

2. We participate in the Hemispheric Forums which take place about a month prior to General Assemblies and also a few months prior to the Summits. These are true workshops where delegates from many CSO divide into small groups to discuss at length issues related to the topics selected in the Agenda and come up with suggestions and proposals that will resolve problems. A list of these proposals is later presented to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, during a dialogue between them and civil society, prior to General Assembly and Summit sessions. We have participated in Hemispheric Forums in: Ecuador, Mexico, and Washington, D.C. As a matter of fact, two Texas members have participated in these Forums: Sylvia Williams, who went with me some time ago and Margie Gillette, who just came back from the Forum last month. Margie is here with us, and I would like for her to tell us briefly her impressions, before I go on with the rest of our OAS activities.

As you can see, our participation in the Hemispheric Forums is time well spent. It leaves us with a feeling of being part of the decision-making that will carve a better future for our continent. I firmly believe that our Founder would be happy to see that we have come around to perform what she had in mind for us. Next month we will be participating in the Hemispheric Forum in Miami, in preparation for the next Summit of the Americas, to take place in 2009 in Trinidad Tobago. Two of our Miami Table members will be representing the Alliance.

3. Our participation in the General Assemblies of the OAS is mostly to ensure that our presence is felt during the dialogue with the representatives of the various nations. At that time, an assigned delegate presents the proposals prepared during the previous Forum, as the contribution from Civil Society. Other than that, it is basically a learning experience to witness the work of the OAS through reports and speeches presented by the representatives of member countries and OAS dignitaries. There is tight security during these sessions and all delegates of civil society attend as special guests.....We have participated in the following General Assemblies : Santiago, Quito, Fort Lauderdale, where Peggy Clark was delegate, Santo Domingo, Panama and we will participate next June in Medellin, Colombia.

4. As far as Summits of the Americas, these are super special and take place every 4 years. The Alliance sent a delegate to the Special Summit of the Americas, which took place in 2004 in Monterrey, Mexico. Our delegate was Martha Ofelia de Calderon, currently Associate Director of the Alliance. In 2005 I had the honor to represent the Alliance at the Summit of Mar del Plata.

All Presidents of the American nations are present at these events and I will share a few of my impressions: (this space for talking ad-lib)

5. Now, we shall mention some of the “perks” we get by being a registered OSC
- A. Our organization becomes well known and recognized in the continent.
 - B. We are eligible to present candidates for graduate scholarships.
 - C. We are eligible to receive up to \$10,000 for worthy projects. (Not scholarships)
 - D. We are invited to lectures sponsored by the OAS in D.C. (Two of your ex-Texas members, Mary Ann Palka and Cecilia Pareja have attended several.
 - E. We can participate in virtual surveys concerning vital social issues.
 - F. We are able to promote mutual cooperation with OAS Offices located in various countries. In fact, we have already done so in Costa Rica, Mexico and Perú. (Space for ad-lib information)
 - G. We are able to mention our registration in our stationary, thus gaining status.
 - H. Our access to resources has broadened, by being in contact with other OSC.

CONCLUSIONS:

We move within a globalized world. Our inner circle is important and worthy of receiving our special attention. Each one of us, as a Pan American member, is proud of our own Table and does the best we can for it to grow and reach out. However, we can't ignore the fact that we are part of a society and furthermore, as Table members, we probably belong to a National or State Association and last but not least, to the Alliance of Pan American Round Tables.

I firmly believe that our relationship to the OAS is strengthening our bond with the Alliance of PART. It is the Alliance that actually holds the registration by the OAS, but then, since each member in each Table is part of the Alliance, every Table can justifiably mention that we are an Organization that is able to participate in OAS activities. The obvious proof is that we have delegates from many Tables representing the Alliance in important OAS events. They don't necessarily have to be members of our OAS Committee, nor Alliance Officers. They can be regular Table members, who belong to this continental family of ours.

We are unique as an Organization of Civil Society, inasmuch as other CSO are located only in one country or city. We have members in 18 countries of the Americas and therefore we get to cover a lot more territory. Some of you might

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remember a young attorney called Victor Hugo Ricco, from Cordoba, Argentina. He was invited to our Alliance Convention in Cordoba. I met him in Washington D.C. during my very first Hemispheric Forum. He was very active in an OSC dedicated to human rights and environmental issues. I admired his eloquence and how well he presented their proposals. At the end of the session, we were chatting and I explained to him what our Alliance was all about. After listening to my account he said something I will never forget: "Ustedes son un gigante dormido " (You are a sleeping giant)

Obviously, I had never thought of the Alliance as being "asleep"...On the contrary...However, I think what Victor meant is that we weren't aware of the enormous potential we have, by the sole fact of having members in so many countries. "Imagine how much more than us you can accomplish" is what he added later.

I leave you with that thought...We can accomplish much in our own communities...But we can accomplish much more through our relationship with the OAS.

Thanks for your undivided attention, HELENA

I am now open for any questions....

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