

US Partnership with the Americas and the 2009 Summit of the Americas

The Jamaica Observer
Internet Edition

THOMAS A SHANNON
Saturday, March 01, 2008



THOMAS A
SHANNON

We live in a hemisphere characterised by dynamic, positive change. Democracy, free markets, and economic integration have unleashed powerful, popular forces. The elected governments of the Americas are working to translate these forces into tangible benefits for the peoples of the Americas - such as expanding economic opportunity and reducing poverty; connecting national infrastructures, integrating electricity grids and energy markets; and collaborating on alternative energy sources. This story of positive change has an underlying theme: dialogue and engagement between countries, and broad recognition that we must address our differences but also appreciate the commonalities that bind us together. So it is no coincidence that the success stories of our region are increasingly products of cooperation and collaboration, and vibrant multilateralism.

A great example of this substantive dialogue took place this week in Tobago, as negotiations begin for the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago to be held early in 2009. The ongoing presidential campaigns in the United States remind us that there will be a new US president participating in that summit. Yet amidst this dynamic background, the discussions in preparation for the 2009 summit underscore the continuity of US policy in the Americas, as well as our commitment to engaging, in a bipartisan manner, in the dialogue of the summit and the important partnerships this collaboration fosters.

Looking forward to the fifth summit, we must develop together, concrete, measurable goals and demonstrate to the people of our countries how the summit process positively affects their lives.

These summits have helped to consolidate the region's commitment to democracy. At the Third Summit in Quebec in 2001, the region's 34 democratically elected leaders mandated the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which states that the "peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it".

To promote prosperity, at the Fourth Summit in 2005, President Bush called for the first-ever Americas Competitiveness Forum, which then took place in Atlanta June 10-13, 2007, and focused on small business development, supply chain management, education and training, and innovation. He also announced the Latin America and Caribbean Infrastructure Development Programme, a partnership with the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to catalyse private investment in infrastructure in Latin America, which could have an impact of as much as \$800 million to \$1 billion in new investments. At Nuevo Leon in 2004, leaders committed to create the conditions to reduce by half, the average cost of remittance transfers. According to the IDB, transaction costs to send remittances have been reduced from 15 per cent pre-2000 to 5.6 per cent in 2006.

The summit process has also helped the region to invest in its greatest resource - its people. Based on a 2001 summit commitment, the United States funds three regional Centres of Excellence for Teacher Training in Central America, the Caribbean, and the Andean regions. By 2007, over 18,300 teachers had received training, reaching roughly 600,000 students in the region. With US support, about 640,000 individuals living with HIV/AIDS in the region were receiving anti-retroviral therapy by November 2005, exceeding a 2004 special summit goal.

Finally, the summit-mandated Special Conference on Security in Mexico City (2003) produced the Declaration on Security in the Americas, which builds a hemispheric approach to address regional challenges such as terrorism, drugs, natural disasters, and trafficking in persons.

The United States remains committed, in a bipartisan manner, to our partnership with the Americas, and to the Summit of the Americas process. The summits have helped to lay the groundwork for the pillars of US policy toward the region - consolidating democracy, promoting prosperity, investing in people to advance social justice, and securing the democratic state. The United States looks forward to building upon these commitments with our hemispheric partners as we begin negotiations for the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

Thomas A Shannon is US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs.