

Ambassador Green's Summit of the Americas Remarks 2022

Thank you and these will be just preliminary overview remarks to get to the meat of your program.

As a reminder, a bit of context, it was 40 years ago today, this very day, that Ronald Reagan gave his famous Westminster speech. He was the first president ever to speak before the British parliament, but it was that speech that launched the US approach to democracy assistance all around the world. 40 years ago today, Ronald Reagan told us all: democracy is not a fragile flower, still it needs cultivating. He said if the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy. And that's what prompted that process. It was 20 years ago, roughly, that the Inter-American Democratic Charter was adopted. And that charter says in its very first article: peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy, and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend. So where are we today? Well that's what this session is really all about.

So I want to offer my sincere thanks to our hosts here today, UCLA including the Burkle Center for International Relations, the Luskin School of Public Affairs, and the Latin American Institute. I also want to thank our partners, the Carter Center and the Community of Democracies, including its Secretary General and my long-time friend Tom Garrett. And of course I want to thank the many civil society leaders who are here today and those that they represent.

Cultivating and reinforcing democracy is one of the most important challenges our hemisphere faces. In the early 1990s nearly all of the countries in the Western hemisphere were democratic, with Argentina, Brazil, and Chile having successfully transitioned from long periods of military rule. And while there's been continued progress in some parts of the Americas, there have also been challenges and setbacks. In fact, the most recent annual report from our friends at Freedom House suggests that few regions in the world have a greater spread between free and not free countries than ours, than the Americas. Dark spots are clear: the authoritarian regimes of Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, continue to deny their people fair elections as well as basic human rights. Havana continues to harass, beat up, and jail those who stray from the official party line. In Nicaragua, Ortega has dissolved and canceled hundreds of NGOs and unjustly is holding well over 170 political prisoners. In Port-au-Prince the president has been assassinated, and lawlessness has taken hold in too many neighborhoods. And in Venezuela, a country blessed in resources, the economy has been reduced to stock outs, scarcities, and the most basic of food and medicine due to Maduro's mismanagement, corruption, and repression. In troubled parts in the Americas, thousands of Venezuelans, millions, are voting with their feet.

So where do we see hope? Where are their reasons for optimism? First and foremost, in the people of the Americas themselves. And the CSOs, the Civil Society Organizations, that give them a voice. The students and church leaders, who despite all the threats and brutality, stand up for democracy in Nicaragua. The ladies in white who still march, quietly, their family members imprisoned in Cuba. The countless democracy activists in Venezuela, who chose not Maduro but Guaido, who refused to back down no matter how much pain Maduro tries to inflict. So President Reagan spoke at Westminster 40

years ago today, the challenge of democracy's growth has evolved. 40 years ago there was still an ideological debate over whether democracy was actually the right answer for most of the world. The debate is over. And the Inter-American Democratic Charter is very clear proof.

But a new battlefield has emerged in its place, and it is the one that we must talk about now. It involves a new crop of politicians, who brazenly claim democracy's mantle, only to rob the term of any real meaning. They say they want elections, in fact they welcome elections, then they bend the rules, prohibit true debate, and rig the results, so the game is over before it has even begun. In many ways this new front in the campaign for democracy is more dangerous for us, and it is certainly more complex. The opponents of democracy know full well that civil society is the irreplaceable connective tissue between everyday citizens and democratic institutions. It's what helps government become truly citizen centered, and citizen responsive, it's what strengthens the accountability any real democracy must have. And so it's also what autocrats target for intimidation and repression.

So, 40 years on from Westminster, 20 years on from that democratic charter, democracy is to return to its hopeful path once again. It is crucial to protect and to reaffirm the role of civil society throughout the Americas. The challenge is serious, and the work will always be hard, but it's what we owe democracy's frontline heroes: those students in Nicaragua, the artists in Havana, and so many others. And that's what today's session is about, and what we should all take home when we leave here today.

Thank you for this opportunity, I look forward to this discussion, there is important work to be done. So now to get things going, I would like to turn this conversation over to Dr. Benjamin Gedan, who is acting Director of the Wilson's Center Latin American Program. Benjamin over to you.