

SPECIAL note from 1987:

"Only Peace Can Write the New History for future"

"My Country is a country of teachers."

Oscar Arias Sánchez - Nobel Lecture

The Nobel Peace Prize 1987

Oscar Arias Sánchez

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Only Peace Can Write the New History

Desiring peace

Peace consists, very largely, in the fact of desiring it with all one's soul. The inhabitants of my small country, Costa Rica, have realized those words by Erasmus. Mine is an unarmed people, whose children have never seen a fighter or a tank or a warship. One of my guests at this award, here with us today, is José Figueres Ferrer, the man with the vision to abolish my country's armed forces in 1948, and thus set our history on a new course.

I am a Latin American, I am not receiving this prize as Oscar Arias, any more than I am receiving it as the president of my country. While I have not the arrogance to presume to represent anyone, neither do I fear the humility which identifies me with everyone, and with their great causes.

I receive it as one of the 400 million Latin Americans who, in the return to liberty, in the exercise of democracy, are seeking the way to overcome so much misery and so much injustice. I come from that Latin America whose face is deeply marked with pain, the record of the exile, torture, imprisonment and death of many of its men and its women. I come from that Latin American region where totalitarian regimes still exist which put the whole of humanity to shame.

America's scars

The scars by which America is marked are deep. At this very time, America is seeking to return to freedom, and it is only as it approaches democracy that it can see the dreadful trail of torture, banishment and death left by dictators. The problems America has to overcome are enormous. An inheritance from an unjust past has been aggravated by the fatal deeds of tyrants to produce foreign debts, social insensitivity, economic upheavals, corruption and the many other evils of our societies. The evils are manifest, naked to the view of anyone who cares to see them.

Seeing the size of the challenge, no wonder many are prey to discouragement; or that apocalyptic prophets abound, announcing the failures of the fight against poverty, proclaiming the immediate fall of the democracies, forecasting the futility of peace-making efforts.

I do not share this defeatism. I cannot accept to be realistic means to tolerate misery, violence and hate. I do not believe that the hungry man should be treated as subversive for expressing his suffering. I shall never accept that the law can be used to justify tragedy, to keep things as they are, to make us abandon our ideas of a different world. Law is the path of liberty, and must as such open the way to progress for everyone.

Liberty performs miracles

Liberty performs miracles. To free men, everything is possible. A free and democratic America can meet the challenges confronting it. When I assumed the presidency of Costa Rica, I called for an alliance for freedom and democracy in the Americas. I said then, and I repeat today, that we should not be the allies, either politically or economically, of governments which oppress their peoples. Latin America has never known a single war between two democracies. That is sufficient reason for every man of good faith, every well-intentioned nation, to support efforts to put an end to tyranny.

America cannot wait

America's freedom, the freedom of the whole of America, cannot wait. I come from a world with huge problems, which we shall overcome in freedom. I come from a world in a hurry, because hunger cannot wait. When hope is forgotten, violence does not delay. Dogmatism is too impatient for dialogue. I come from a world where, if we are to make sure that there will be no turning back from our progress towards liberty, if we are to frustrate every oppressive intent, we have no time to lose. I come from a world which cannot wait for the guerilla and the soldier to hold their fire: young people are dying, brothers are dying, and tomorrow who can tell why. I come from a world which cannot wait to open prison gates not, as before, for free men to go in, but for those imprisoned to come out.

America's liberty and democracy have no time to lose, and we need the whole world's understanding to win freedom from dictators, to win freedom from misery.

I come from Central America

I accept this prize as one of 27 million Central Americans. Behind the democratic awakening in Central America lies over a century of merciless dictatorships and general injustice and poverty. The choice before my little America is whether to suffer another century of violence, or to achieve peace by overcoming the fear of liberty. Only peace can write the new history.

We in Central America will not lose faith. We shall set history right. How sad that they would have us believe that peace is a dream, justice utopian, shared well-being impossible! How sad that there should be people in the world who cannot understand that in the former plantations of Central America, nations are asserting themselves and striving, with every right, for better destinies for their peoples! How sad that some cannot see that Central America does not want to prolong its past, but to create a new future, with hope for the young and dignity for the old!

Realizing dreams

The Central American isthmus is a region of great contrasts, but also of heartening unison. Millions of men and women share dreams of freedom and progress. In some countries, the dreams are dispelled by systematic violations of human rights; they are shattered by fratricidal struggles in town and country, and come up against the realities of poverty so extreme it stops the heart. Poets who are the pride of mankind know that millions upon

millions cannot read them in their own countries, because so many of the men and women there are illiterate. There are on this narrow strip of land painters and sculptors whom we shall admire for ever, but also dictators whom we have no wish to remember because they offend most cherished human values.

Central America cannot go on dreaming, nor does it want to. History demands that dreams turn into realities. Now, when there is no time to lose. Today, when we can take our destiny in our own hands. In this region, home alike to the oldest and strongest democracy in Latin America - that of Costa Rica - and to a history of the most merciless and cruel dictatorships, democratic awakening requires a special loyalty to freedom.

Seeing that the past dictatorships were only capable of creating misery and crippling hope, how absurd to pretend to cure the evils of one extreme dictatorship by means of its opposite! No one in Central America has the right to fear freedom, no one is entitled to preach absolute truths. The evils of one dogma are the evils of any dogma. They are all the enemies of human creativity. As Pascal said: "We know a great deal to make us sceptical. We know very little to make us dogmatic".

History can only move towards liberty. History can only have justice at its heart. To march in the opposite direction to history is to be on the road to shame, poverty and oppression. Without freedom, there is no revolution. All oppression runs counter to man's spirit.

Freedom: a shared longing

Central America is at an agonizing crossroad: faced with terrible poverty, some call, from mountains or from governments, for dictatorships with other ideologies, ignoring the cries for freedom of many generations. To the serious problems of general misery, as we know them in their North-South context, is added the conflict between East and West. Where poverty meets conflicting ideologies and the fear of liberty, one can see a cross of ill omen taking shape in Central America.

Let us make no mistake. The only answer for Central America, the answer to its poverty as well as to its political challenges, is freedom from misery and freedom from fear. Anyone who proposes to solve the ills of centuries in the name of dogma will only help to make the problems of the past grow bigger in the future.

There is a shared desire in the spirit of man which has for centuries sought liberty in Central America. No one must betray this spiritual union. To do so would be to condemn our little America to another hundred years of horrifying oppression, of meaningless death, of fighting for freedom.

I am from Costa Rica

I am receiving this prize as one of 2.7 million Costa Ricans. My people draw their sacred liberty from the two oceans which bound us to the East and West. To the South and to the North, Costa Rica has almost always been bounded by dictators and dictatorships. We are an unarmed people, and we are fighting to remain free from hunger. To America we are a symbol of peace, and we hope to be a symbol of development. We intend to show that peace is both the prerequisite and the fruit of progress.

Country of teachers

My country is a country of teachers. It is therefore a country of peace. We discuss our

successes and failures in complete freedom. Because our country is a country of teachers, we closed the army camps, and our children go with books under their arms, not with rifles on their shoulders. We believe in dialogue, in agreement, in reaching a consensus. We reject violence. Because my country is a country of teachers, we believe in convincing our opponents, not defeating them. We prefer raising the fallen to crushing them, because we believe that no one possesses the absolute truth. Because mine is a country of teachers, we seek an economy in which men cooperate in a spirit of solidarity, not an economy in which they compete to their own extinction.

Education in my country has been compulsory and free for 118 years. Health care now extends to every citizen, and housing for the people is a basic aim of my Government.

A new economy

Just as we take pride in many of our achievements, we make no secret of our worries and problems. In hard times, we must be capable of establishing a new economy and restoring growth. We have said that we do not want an economy which is insensitive to domestic needs or to the demands of the most humble. We have said that we will not, merely for the sake of economic growth, give up our hope of creating a more egalitarian society. Our country has the lowest rate of unemployment in the Western hemisphere. We hope to be the first Latin American country to be rid of slums. We are convinced that a country free from slums will be a country free from hatred, where poor people, too, can enjoy the privilege of working for progress in freedom.

Stronger than a thousand armies

In these years of bitterness in Central America, many people in my country are afraid that, driven by minds diseased and blinded by fanaticism, the violence in the region may spread to Costa Rica. Some have given way to the fear that we would have to establish an army to keep violence away from our borders. What senseless weakness! Such ideas are worth less than the thirty pieces of silver handed to Judas. Costa Rica's fortress, the strength which makes it invincible by force, which makes it stronger than a thousand armies, is the power of liberty, of its principles, of the great ideals of our civilization. When one honestly lives up to one's ideas, when one is not afraid of liberty, one is invulnerable to totalitarian blows.

We know in Costa Rica that only freedom allows political projects to be realized which embrace a country's entire population. Only freedom allows people to be reconciled in tolerance. The painful paths trodden aimlessly around the world by wandering Cubans, Nicaraguans, Paraguayans, Chileans, and so many others who cannot return to their own countries, testify most cruelly to the rule of dogma. Liberty bears no labels, democracy no colors. One can tell them when one meets them, as the real experience of a people.

A peace plan

Faced with the nearness of Central America's violence, Costa Rica with all its history, and especially with its youthful idealism, obliged me to take to the region's battlefield the peace of my people, the faith in dialogue, the need for tolerance. As the people's servant, I proposed a peace plan for Central America. The plan was also founded on Simon Bolivar's cry for freedom, manifested in the tenacious and brave work of the Contadora Group and the Support Group.

I am one of five presidents

I receive this award as one of the five presidents who have pledged to the world the will of

their peoples to exchange a history of oppression for a future of freedom; a history of hunger for a destiny of progress; the cry of mothers and the violent death of youths for a hope, a path of peace which we wish to take together.

Hope is the strongest driving force for a people. Hope which brings about change, which produces new realities, is what opens man's road to freedom. Once hope has taken hold, courage must unite with wisdom. That is the only way of avoiding violence, the only way of maintaining the calm one needs to respond peacefully to offences.

However noble a crusade, some people will desire and promote its failure. Some few appear to accept war as the normal course of events, as the solution to problems. How ironic that powerful forces are angered by interruptions in the course of war, by efforts to eliminate the sources of hatred! How ironic that any intention to stop war in its course triggers rages and attacks, as if we were disturbing the sleep of the just or halting a necessary measure, and not a heart-rending evil! How ironic for peace-making efforts to discover that hatred is stronger for many than love; that the longing to achieve power through military victories makes so many men lose their reason, forget all shame, and betray history.

Let weapons fall silent

Five presidents in Central America have signed an accord to seek a firm and lasting peace. We want arms to fall silent and men to speak. Our sons are being killed by conventional weapons. Our youths are being killed by conventional weapons.

Fear of nuclear war, the horrors of what we have heard about the nuclear end of the world, seems to have made us uncaring about conventional war. Memories of Hiroshima are stronger than memories of Vietnam! How welcome it would be if conventional weapons were treated with the same awe as the atom bomb! How welcome it would be if the killing of many little by little, everyday, was considered just as outrageous as the killing of many all at once! Do we really live in such an irrational world that we would be more reluctant to use conventional weapons if every country had the bomb, and the fate of the world depended on a single madman? Would that make universal peace more secure? Have we any right to forget the 78 million human beings killed in the wars of this twentieth century?

The world today is divided between those who live in fear of being destroyed in nuclear war, and those who are dying day by day in wars fought with conventional weapons. This terror of the final war is so great that it has spread the most frightening insensibility towards the arms race and the use of non-nuclear weapons. We need most urgently - our intelligence requires us, our pity enjoins us - to struggle with equal intensity to ensure that neither Hiroshima nor Vietnam is repeated.

Weapons do not fire on their own. Those who have lost hope fire them. Those who are controlled by dogmas fire them. We must fight for peace undismayed, and fearlessly accept these challenges from those without hope and from the threats of fanatics.

I say to the poet

The peace plan which we five presidents signed accepts all the challenges. The path to peace is difficult, very difficult. We in Central America need everyone's help to achieve peace.

It is easier to predict the defeat of peace in Central America than its victory. That is how it was when man wanted to fly, and when he wanted to conquer space. That is how it was in

the hard days of the two world wars which our century has known. That is how it was and still is as man confronts the most dreadful diseases and the task eliminating poverty and hunger in the world.

History was not written by men who predicted failure, who gave up their dreams, who abandoned their principles, who allowed their laziness to put their intelligence to sleep. If certain men at times were alone in seeking victory, they always had at their side the watchful spirit of their peoples, the faith and destiny of many generations.

Perhaps it was in difficult times for Central America, like those we are living through today, perhaps it was in premonition of the present crossroads, that Rubén Darío, our America's greatest poet², wrote these lines, convinced that history would take its course:

"Pray, generous, pious and proud;
pray, chaste, pure, heavenly and brave;
intercede for us, entreat for us,
for already we are almost without sap or shoot,
without soul, without life, without light, without Quixote,
without feet and without wings, without Sancho and without God".

I assure the immortal poet that we shall not cease to dream, we shall not fear wisdom, we shall not flee from freedom. To the eternal poet I say that in Central America we shall not forget Quixote, we shall not renounce life, we shall not turn our backs on the spirit, and we shall never lose our faith in God.

I am one of those five men who signed an accord, a commitment which consists, very largely, in the fact of desiring peace with all one's soul.

Thank you.

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