



COLLEAGUES FOR THE AMERICAS SEMINAR SERIES
"Mr. President, the Caribbean is Still a Strategic Zone"

November 16, 2004

Featured Guest: **Dr. Ivelaw Griffith**, Dean of The Honors College, Professor of Political Science, Florida International University (FIU).

Dr. Ivelaw Griffith is a specialist on Caribbean and Inter-American security and narcotics issues, he has published seven books, most recently *Caribbean Security in the Age of Terror: Challenge and Change*, *Drugs and Security in the Caribbean: Sovereignty Under Siege*, and *The Political Economy of Drugs in the Caribbean*. He also has published extensively in scholarly journals.

The Royal Military College of Canada, the George Marshall Center for European Security Studies in Germany, and the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies in Washington DC are among the places Dr. Griffith has been a Visiting Scholar, and he has been a consultant to Canada's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the OAS, USAID and other bodies. He has lectured extensively at academic, military and law enforcement institutions in the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States. The MacArthur Foundation, the University of Miami's North-South Center and FIU have funded his research and he is a recipient of FIU's Award of Excellence in Research. A past President of the Caribbean Studies Association, Ivelaw serves on the editorial boards of *Security and Defense Studies Review* and *Caribbean Journal of Criminology and Social Psychology*.

Dr. Griffith delivered remarks entitled, "Mr. President, the Caribbean is Still a Strategic Zone," which were followed by a lively discussion. A summary of the initial remarks follows.

Why should the President be reminded about the Caribbean? What is the strategic importance of the Caribbean? How does it fit into the President's priorities and today's context? These are among the questions raised and addressed early in the session. Dr. Griffith argued that the issue of national interest is a key consideration, and that the Caribbean factors into United States national interests through values and strategies that it pursues (such as the "distinctly American internationalism" guided by the National Security Strategy 2002).

As a global power, the US has several national interests beyond the Caribbean in which it is engaged. Global counter-terrorism, especially in the Afghanistan and Iraq theatres, concerns the US greatly. Improving relations with Europe, engagement in Israel and Palestine post-Arafat, containing Iran and North Korea, and focusing on Mexico, the Andean and the Southern Cone countries are also highly important national interests. However, national interest also dictates that the Caribbean not be forgotten.

Global engagement must actively consider this region. Four fulcrums of national interest, or "value arenas," make the Caribbean a zone of strategic importance. These are democracy, geopolitics, geo-economics, and geo-narcotics. Democracy is a core US political value and national interest. Unfortunately the pursuit of this goal often conflicts with other interests, creating a mixed record. For instance, the US has both worked against unacceptable democratic expressions within some countries, and has also supported weak democracies in other countries. Parts of the Caribbean are bastions of electoral democracy. Despite strong procedural democracy, a number of dangers must be resolved. Low and declining voter turn-out, electoral fraud, and drug money in campaign financing endanger the credibility of the democratic process in some places in the region. Moreover, several factors undermine confidence in democracy. These include poverty, corruption, and dysfunctional judicial systems. Involvement mitigates the risks these problems pose to US core national interests.

The second fulcrum is geopolitics. Location and proximity make a difference, especially if they coexist with a strategic resource

that is important commercially and militarily. Six Caribbean Basin countries, including Venezuela, produce oil. Chavez and his policies are significant in how the US does business. But the importance of hydrocarbons goes beyond production to refinement. Six other countries refine oil, and provide a significant quantity to service the US market. Bauxite is another strategic resource, and a significant proportion of United States imports of this commodity comes from the Caribbean Basin. Used in circuitry, airplane components, and aluminum products, the proximity of the source as well as cheap import costs place access to this resource from the Caribbean an element of US national interest.

As another aspect of geopolitics, the Caribbean is vital in US worldwide engagement as a part of the security network. This is the “southern flank” or “strategic rear” or “third border.” Military Assistance Advisory groups and Military Liaison Offices coordinate force presence. Beyond this, there are Forward Operating Locations in the Caribbean that are vital to the prosecution of missions against drug production and trafficking, and terrorism. From the Caribbean vantage point, the military bases are an important part of their economy. While the rents may not represent much money for the US, they can do a lot for the countries concerned. Hence, strategically, the US and Caribbean countries rely on each other.

The other issues of geo-economics and geo-narcotics will require collaboration. Yes, there is still a “drug problem,” the Caribbean is still a transit zone, and drugs are a danger for the US and Caribbean. But economic and narcotics problems cannot be confronted in isolation; rather, they touch a number of other interconnected, yet distinct issues that go beyond production, trafficking, consumption and money laundering. To make any progress, one must have an appreciation of the big picture.

Further, the Caribbean Basin is a potential bridge for terrorists. Its geographic location means that movements into, through, and out of the region are significant. Both refugees and tourists result from political and cultural openness that connects the Caribbean, the US, and the rest of the world. Offshore banking, investment, and strategic materials are all positioned so that someone could attack significant US interests via the Caribbean Basin. They don't have to come to the homeland to cause damage, the neighborhood provides ample opportunities.

In addition to constant engagement, six “hot spots and horizon issues” touch on national interests. Cuba is likely to undergo change that will transform the dynamics in the Caribbean with ramifications for the US, Cuba, and the whole region. Venezuela's role in the Caribbean is evolving, but this concern is not cause for overreaction. HIV/AIDS jeopardize the capacity of small nations with important geographic and natural resources to exercise national sovereignty and state capacity. Haiti will require a global response. US engagement must be part of shared hemispheric/global responsibility to bring actors to the table, and facilitate leadership to “fix Haiti”. Even if things are done multilaterally, the Haitian political-economic landscape is not amenable to easy fixes, as all social, political, and economic conditions have to be addressed at the same time for there to be any appreciable difference in the Haitian reality.

The absence of money is not the only problem; absorptive capacity within Haiti is part of the dilemma. One needs to think about deliverables and implementation—how can the money be used to ensure that roads, schools, etc. are built? Environmental devastation with preexisting unstable conditions also is a recipe for disaster. This reality cannot be ignored in Haitian. Who in Granada or Haiti will be interested in thinking about democracy when they have to contend with basic survival issues due to the nature of the economy, the environment, and other deleterious situations? Natural disasters impact the security framework, and therefore influence US relations with the Caribbean. Catastrophes also have long-term implications for businesses in the region. FTAA ought to facilitate investment, but fixing the economy with a good package of investment, aid, and business changes is not an end in itself. Also to be considered is how the political sphere works; the economy will not work if the bureaucracy does not work. There must be simultaneous engagement.

There needs to be more conversation on points of engagement. Rather than tell the Caribbean what they need, the conversation should be framed around: “Here are the things we can talk about.” And then, finally, Mr. President, you must listen. Listen to the requests, suggestions, interests of the region, not because you have the time, but because of the importance of this relationship to the national interest of the United States of America.

The INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar Series is a program of monthly meetings that commenced in 1994 to further research on hemispheric security and defense issues and to contribute to the professional education of United States and foreign practitioners.

The opinions, conclusions and recommendations expressed or implied within this report are those of the contributor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

For more information about this report or the "Colleagues for the Americas" program, please contact Mr. John Cope, tel.: 202-685-2373, e-mail: copej@ndu.edu.

[INSS Home Page](#) | [NDU Home Page](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Updated on undefined, undefined NaN, NaN