

Preface

Consider the Americas of the 15th century: one vast stretch of relatively undeveloped land; lightly populated by indigenous peoples in varied and thriving societies, all blissfully unaware of the pending arrival of the conquistadores. From what is today Ellesmere Island in remote northern Canada to the tip of Tierra del Fuego in the far south, natural resources—water, timber, arable land, a wide variety of minerals—were plentiful and available.

Spring forward to the 21st century—half a millennium later. Five-hundred years of developing those resources have left us with a legacy of prosperity and progress beyond anything the conquistadores imagined. But was that progress evenly distributed? One would think so. Given the relatively even distribution of resources, it would be reasonable to expect there to be some rough similarity in how the stories turned out across the Americas, at least in terms of wealth, education, and development.

And yet, in the north—the United States and Canada—some 400 million people live at a standard of economic development that many in the south—from Mexico through Central America, the Caribbean, and much of South America—can only dream of. In some cases, even the dreams may seem out of reach to the nearly one-third of the population who live on less than 2 dollars a day. In a part of the world blessed with extraordinary natural wealth and highly advantageous geographic location, such poverty are tragedy of the highest order. This division of wealth and the inequities it represents are fundamental and challenging aspects of relations between the United States and its neighbors to the south.

In addressing Latin American diplomats and members of our Congress at a White House reception nearly fifty years ago, President John F. Kennedy said: “This new world of ours is not merely an accident of geography. Our continents are bound together by a common history . . . our nations are the product of a common struggle . . . and our peoples share a common heritage.”

It is a common heritage that has at times been overshadowed by the unbalanced, and often resented, history of U.S. military and political intervention in the region in the 19th and 20th centuries. This particular legacy of heavy handedness and gunboat diplomacy still poses challenges to the

building of bridges between north and south. But we've made great strides to develop a legacy of partnership and cooperation over the last few years.

As Commander of U.S. Southern Command, I was charged by the Secretary of Defense and the President with all U.S. military operations and activities in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America as part of a broader effort to build those bridges. This included leading operations in support of counternarcotic activities as well as leading the broad efforts of the Joint Interagency Task Force—South in Key West. I was also responsible for connecting U.S. and partner militaries to conduct training and exercises, respond to humanitarian crises, and conduct medical training and medical diplomacy missions like the voyages of the hospital ship USNS *Comfort*.

After spending decades studying and, most recently, living and working in this region, I wanted to spend some time writing about my observations and reflections on this beautiful, culturally rich, complex, and fascinating part of the world. Recognizing that quarrel is the daughter of distrust—and that distrust is born from misunderstanding—I write this book with one overarching goal in mind: to help close gaps of understanding between north and south and in doing so, to help galvanize the foundation of trust so vital to exchanging ideas, understanding each other, and cooperating with one another as we continue writing our common history.

This short book reflects a quarter of a million miles of travel to almost every nation in the region over the past 30 years, but especially during my time in command between 2006 and 2009. I have discussed its contents with some of the leading diplomats, intellectuals, political scientists, and security practitioners who have made focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean their life's work. Their insight and advice have been enlightening in the extreme. My interagency partners, especially at the State Department and the Agency for International Development—dedicated Americans whose heavy lifting in the areas of diplomacy and development daily pave the way to continued progress and prosperity—have been especially thoughtful and helpful.

I have also benefited immensely from my many superb colleagues at U.S. Southern Command. These are all passionate individuals who every day contributed their expertise, the ideas, and their views to help shape my own. My experience at U.S. Southern Command was defined and enhanced through my exposure and collaboration with an amazing cadre of individuals: Ambassadors Lew Amselem and Paul Trivelli; Generals Glenn Spears, Keith Huber, Norm Seip, Ken Keen, Dave Fadok, Dave Garza, Biv Bivens, John Croley, Charlie Cleveland, Hector Pagan, and Mike Moeller; Admirals Nan Derenzi, Harry Harris, Jim Stevenson, Tom Meeks, Joe Kernan, and Rob

Parker; and civilian Senior Executive Service professionals Caryn Hollis, Todd Schafer, Tom Schoenbeck, and all the members of my Distinguished Advisory Panel without whom strategic connections in the region would have been impossible to make. My executive assistant for 3 years, Carol Maldonado, truly stood out in her efforts to help me understand the world to the south, not the least of which included assisting my own learning of the beautiful Spanish language.

As part of my “travel support team,” I was lucky to rely on my director of strategic communication, Sarah Nagelmann; our leading cultural expert and linguist, Lieutenant Colonel Barbara Fick; my Commander’s Action Group, including Captain Wade Wilkenson, Lieutenant Colonels Mike Gough and John Perez, Commander Juan Orozco, Lieutenant Commander Rich LeBron, Major Al Perez, and Lieutenant Rob Prewett; and my Special Assistant for Congressional Affairs, Lizzie Gonzalez, who not only helped me navigate the Halls of Congress, but helped me chart a course to better understand Cuba and Cubans. Each and every one of them made our trips true voyages of discovery that contributed to the final form of this work. I also wish to extend a special thanks to Commander Elton “Thumper” Parker, who brought his skilled pen to the final editing of this volume over the past year.

Above all, I owe an eternal debt of gratitude to my Commander’s Action Group leader, Colonel Jorge Silveira—whose intellect is matched only by his humility and selflessness—for his friendship and counsel as we sailed together through the Americas living the adventures that brought this book to life.

Of course, at the center of it all are my wife Laura, and my daughters Christina and Julia, who always put up with Dad’s “boring” weekend work of thinking, reading, and writing. To them I owe it all.

As always in a work like this, all errors of fact or judgment are mine alone, and I take full responsibility for them—with the concomitant hope that in some small way this volume will help increase understanding and engagement for the United States with our neighbors to the south.

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