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ESSAY

EMBRACE OUR SHARED FUTURE

Colombians have come too far to give up on better tomorrows and brighter futures for their children. The United States must stand with them.

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AS THE UNITED STATES AND COLOMBIA celebrate two hundred years of bilateral relations, the foundations of our friendship are strong, and the prospects for greater cooperation that benefits our people, our region, and our world are bright. It has been an honor to support Colombia over the last 20-plus years, see our strong bonds grow even stronger—even in hard times, and witness Colombia’s emergence as a leader in our hemisphere.

I fell in love with Colombia when I read *100 Years of Solitude* as a law student. I was so captivated that I read it right through my tax law class. My professor abruptly asked me after class what was so much more interesting than his lecture. I showed him the novel and said I thought it was the greatest written in any language since William Faulkner died. My later friendship with Gabo, which began in 1994 and endured until he passed away, was a great gift in my life, as have been the relationships I’ve formed with Colombian presidents and other elected leaders, great musicians, business and philanthropic leaders, and the citizens I’ve met all over the country who have contributed in their own way to give Colombia’s children a future of peace, prosperity, and security.

As president, I was proud to launch Plan Colombia with President Andrés Pastrana at a time when drug cartels and their armed supporters

controlled about a third of the country. It was renewed several times by leaders of both countries, regardless of party—a commitment to give Colombia back to the people that has endured despite the massive migration from Venezuela, the COVID-19 pandemic, the resurgence of violence, and increased drug production.

In the face of these challenges and the worldwide assault on inclusive, cooperating democracies, it is important never to forget that Colombia is a country rich in history, culture, natural resources, environmental treasures, and wonderful, hardworking people. Colombians have come too far to give up on better tomorrows and brighter futures for their children. And the United States must stand with the Colombian people.

There are several areas where further progress can be made. Colombia is especially well-positioned to transition to clean, renewable, more affordable energy systems. The World Economic Forum has rated Colombia third in South America in its Energy Transition Index,¹ with significant potential for developing solar, wind, and biomass sources. Already, the renewable energy sector employs about two million people throughout Latin America,² with significant room for growth. This is especially important as so much of Colombia's clean energy potential—especially for wind—is located near the Venezuelan border, where Colombians and displaced Venezuelans alike are yearning for new job sources.

Another huge opportunity to put people to work while strengthening the natural environment is agroforestry. Colombia's location makes it suitable for at least ten forest species, and the government offers strong incentives for reforestation projects. Colombia and its people also have the climate, farming knowledge, and skills to grow almost any crop, including high-level exports like its wonderful coffee, essential oils, and spices, which can support development in many rural and often underserved communities.

Colombia also boasts a growing and innovative tech sector. President Iván Duque and his government have demonstrated strong support for the tech sector, including establishing new governmental entities that offer grants, mentoring, networking, and other services to support innovation and entrepreneurship in this critical field.

I've been to Colombia many times over the last twenty-two years. Each visit holds vivid memories. In 2000, while I was still president, President Andrés Pastrana took my daughter Chelsea and me on an evening walk

through the historic district of Cartagena, where we met and danced with Los Niños del Vallenato. Their wonderful voices and costumes, making their music a powerful message of peace and resilience, moved me so much that I invited them to perform at the White House and again four years later at the dedication of my Presidential Center. When I returned to Colombia in 2002, during the transition to President Álvaro Uribe, the children greeted me as I stepped off the plane, and a representative of Colombia's Indigenous people presented me with a traditional woven bracelet. I followed tradition and never took it off. Finally, the worn, faded strands fell apart after nineteen years.

In 2017, at the invitation of President Juan Manuel Santos, I went to Medellín, which was hosting the first World Coffee Producers Forum, bringing together coffee growers' associations from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to unite the entire coffee value chain worldwide to promote sustainability and economic fairness for those who harvest the beans. Medellín—with its famous escalators up the mountain of Comuna 13, once the hotbed of narco-trafficking, was the perfect place to gather attendees representing more than forty coffee-producing countries, including roasters, traders, and retailers; financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, and government representatives. It symbolized the country's rebirth, the peace dividend of an emerging regional and global leader.

It is imperative that the United States and Colombia, the two oldest democracies in the Western Hemisphere, keep strengthening our relationship—as we did most recently when US President Joe Biden announced his intention to designate Colombia as a Major US non-NATO Ally. I am proud to have played a role in building that friendship, both in public office and as a private citizen.

People who visit my New York offices, the old farmhouse Hillary and I call home, or my Presidential Library all see evidence of how much Colombia means to me. In my Harlem office, there's a medal that the widow of a police officer killed in the drug wars gave me, saying she wanted me to show it to others because it told Colombia's story, and she didn't need it to remember who he was. In my Midtown office, I keep a first English printing of *100 Years of Solitude*. In my home office, there's a photo of the late Culture Minister Consuelo Araújo, the patron of Los Niños del Vallenato, slain for championing the crusade of the children. There's a photo of Chelsea and

me dancing with them in Cartagena in my home and a beautiful craft work commemorating their visit to the White House in my library. There are Colombian spices that remind me of my foundation's work for small farmers and fishers who support their families by providing restaurants with locally-sourced products.

Memories of yesterdays like these are most important when they drive us to make tomorrow better, so our children can make their own memories without the burden of our nightmares.

I believe our best days together are still to come, and I will continue to do whatever I can to make it so.



Endnotes

- 1 *Fostering Effective Energy Transition 2021 edition*, World Economic Forum, April 20, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/fostering-effective-energy-transition-2021>.
- 2 *Executive Summary: Renewable Energy Market Analysis - Latin America*, International Renewable Energy Agency, 2016, https://www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2016/IRENA_Market_Analysis_Latin_America_summary_EN_2016.
- 3 Statement by Joseph R. Biden of the United States and President Iván Duque Márquez of the Republic of Columbia, US-Colombia Bicentennial Partnership, White House, March 10, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/10/joint-statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-of-the-united-states-and-president-ivan-duque-marquez-of-the-republic-of-colombia-u-s-colombia-bicentennial-partnership/>.