A VISION FOR AMERICA

IN WORDS AND PICTURES

Edited by Stephen Kennedy Smith
and Douglas Brinkley
In and through the personal rediscovery of the great, we find that we need not be passive victims of what we deterministically call circumstances… but by linking ourselves with the great, we can become freer to be ourselves, to be what we most want and admire.”

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On March 13, 1961, President John F. Kennedy set forth a visionary platform for cooperation between the United States and Latin American countries that he called an Alliance for Progress. With a sense of urgency, he called for actions to "lift people from poverty and ignorance and despair," tasks, he noted accurately, that the countries of the hemisphere had neglected. The key, he argued, was to proceed "not with an imperialism of force or fear, but with the rule of courage and freedom and hope for the future of man."

The president’s speech quotes contemporary proposals from Brazil’s then-president, Juscelino Kubitschek, and Costa Rica’s former president José Figueres to show that the ideas he was proposing had support. He called his first significant request to Congress for $500 million to fund the Alliance for Progress "a first step in fulfilling the Act of Bogotá," a "large-scale inter-American effort" that he rightly credited to "my predecessor President Eisenhower . . . to attack the social barriers which block economic progress."

The "Alliance for Progress" speech underlines Kennedy’s faith in democracy as a goal and also as a way to conduct politics. The speech highlights his belief in the value of international engagement. He encouraged all countries in the hemisphere to commit to freer trade policies (to be known eventually as the “Kennedy Round” of negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). He also committed his administration to supporting the existing Latin American Free Trade Association and the Central American Common Market.

Kennedy urged the development and deepening of international academic exchanges and invited “Latin American scientists to work with us in new projects in fields such as medicine and agriculture, physics and astronomy, and desalinization," thus strengthening bonds between universities across the hemisphere. Kennedy’s internationalism committed considerable U.S. assistance for Latin America’s social
survived in Latin America. Even supported such coups. By the late 1970s, only three democratic regimes in America, democratic regimes tumbled, in part as a result of Cold War fears over communism. In the later years of the 1960s, in country after country in Latin substantial military assistance in various countries to hobble any nascent of a free and fair election, Cheddi Jagan, would be a Cuban ally. It disbursed the government of Cuba and its myriad international revolutionary activities. It in a continent-spanning effort to overthrow, or at least to thwart and undermine, resources of the Kennedy administration, which engaged in day-to-day operations to assassinate Fidel Castro. The Cuban exiles who made up the brigade (recruited, funded, trained, and ill-advised by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency) sought to overthrow Fidel Castro’s government; they were defeated within seventy-two hours. Later, on the exact day when John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, a CIA operative passed on weapons to a Cuban agent whose mission was to assassinate Fidel Castro.

Communist Cuba would cast a shadow over the imagination, time, and resources of the Kennedy administration, which engaged in day-to-day operations in a continent-spanning effort to overthrow, or at least to thwart and undermine, the government of Cuba and its myriad international revolutionary activities. It blocked democratic procedures in Guyana out of fear that the likely winner of a free and fair election, Cheddi Jagan, would be a Cuban ally. It disbursed substantial military assistance in various countries to hobble any nascent communism. In the later years of the 1960s, in country after country in Latin America, democratic regimes tumbled, in part as a result of Cold War fears over the threat of communism. U.S. governments after Kennedy encouraged or at times even supported such coups. By the late 1970s, only three democratic regimes survived in Latin America.

Yet, from today’s vantage point, President Kennedy seems remarkably prescient. The tyranny and bankruptcy that befell much of the region in the 1970s and ‘80s added urgency to his eloquent call for social, economic, and political change. Much has now improved. The last time the armed forces in Latin America overthrew a constitutional civilian president elected in a free and fair election, to be replaced by a military president, was in 1976. Military coup attempts have become rare, and only two military coups have succeeded in this century, in each case with the national congress acting quickly to install a civilian as successor president.

In this century, poverty rates have fallen systematically and significantly across Latin American countries, and in about half of them, income inequalities have narrowed. Life expectancies have lengthened across most Latin American countries, and illiteracy rates have plummeted. Beginning in the late 1980s, the United States proceeded to support and defend democratic institutions in the region. President Kennedy, who favored free trade, might have welcomed the array of new free trade agreements that contributed to prosperity in Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, and the Pacific Coast countries of South America. What faltered after Kennedy’s death, and has never recovered, was any action on the part of the United States to “help provide resources of a scope and magnitude sufficient to make this bold development plan a success,” an endeavor Kennedy compared to the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II.

On the fifty-fifth anniversary of the formal launch of the Alliance for Progress, Latin America was freer and more democratic than ever. The proportion of its people below the poverty line is now at its lowest. A Latin American middle class emerged during the 1990s, and grew during this century.

John F. Kennedy’s vision has not yet been realized, but the goals he celebrated have come nearer within reach for the reasons he put forth — namely, the ensemble of democracy, free trade, social inclusion, and international engagement. The key steps were taken by courageous women and men in Latin American countries to whom the torch of freedom and hope had been passed from their predecessors who suffered so much.

The greatest tribute to John Kennedy’s vision was that, at long last, many Latin Americans understood the urgency he felt, the moral values he affirmed, and the objectives he had set forth in his clarion call. Much that is wrong endures in Latin America; setbacks appear even as this text is being written. Yet the arc of history in this region has tilted decisively in this century toward a brighter horizon. Latin American women and men took the future of their countries in their hands and changed it for the better.

There is no wife, no mother, no father, no family on this continent that can be comfortable until the inhabitants in all our houses have the opportunity to work... and receive an education.”

—JACQUELINE KENNEDY, LA MORITA, VENEZUELA, DECEMBER 16, 1961

Jacqueline Kennedy addresses the crowd in Spanish in La Morita, Venezuela, at a ceremony granting farms to land under an agrarian reform program—a prerequisite for receiving U.S. aid.

Photo: Cecil Stoughton
Before enthusiastic crowds in Caracas, Venezuela, JFK was the first U.S. president to visit Venezuela, and only the fifth to visit South America. Photo, Paul Slade

The reading copy of the president’s “Alliance for Progress” speech.

One hundred and thirty-nine years ago this week the United States, stirred by the heroic struggle of its fellow Americans, urged the independence and recognition of the new Latin American republics. It was then, at the dawn of freedom throughout this hemisphere, that Bolivar spoke of his desire to see the Americas fashioned into the greatest region in the world, “greatest,” he said, “not so much by virtue of her area and her wealth, as by her freedom and her glory.”

Never in the long history of our hemisphere has this dream been nearer to fulfillment, and never has it been in greater danger.

The genius of our scientists has given us the tools to bring abundance to our land, strength to our industry, and knowledge to our people. For the first time we have the capacity to strike off the remaining bonds of poverty and ignorance—to free our people for the spiritual and intellectual fulfillment which has always been the goal of our civilization.

Yet at this very moment of maximum opportunity, we confront the same forces which have imperiled America throughout its history…

We meet together as firm and ancient friends, united by history and experience and by our determination to advance the values of American civilization. For this New World of ours is not a mere accident of geography. Our continents are bound together by a common history, the endless exploration of new frontiers. Our nations are the product of a common struggle, the revolt from colonial rule. And our people share a common heritage, the quest for dignity and the freedom of man.

The revolutions which gave us birth ignited, in the words of Thomas Paine, “a spark never to be extinguished.” And across vast, turbulent continents these American ideals still stir man’s struggle for national independence and individual freedom. But as we welcome the spread of the American revolution to other lands,
we must also remember that our own struggle—the revolution which began in Philadelphia in 1776, and in Caracas in 1811—is not yet finished. Our hemisphere’s mission is not yet completed. For our unfilled task is to demonstrate to the entire world that man’s unsatisfied aspiration for economic progress and social justice can be achieved by free men working within a framework of democratic institutions. If we can do this in our own hemisphere, and for our own people, we may yet realize the prophecy of the great Mexican patriot, Benito Juárez, that “democracy is the destiny of future humanity.”

As a citizen of the United States let me be the first to admit that we North Americans have not always grasped the significance of this common mission, just as it is also true that many in your own countries have not fully understood the urgency of the need to lift people from poverty and ignorance and despair. But we must turn from these mistakes—from the failures and the misunderstandings of the past to a future full of peril but bright with hope.

Throughout Latin America, a continent rich in resources and in the spiritual and cultural achievements of its people, millions of men and women suffer the daily degradations of poverty and hunger. They lack decent shelter or protection from disease. Their children are deprived of the education or the jobs which are the gateway to a better life. Each day the problems grow more urgent. Population growth is outpacing economic growth—low living standards are further endangered—and discontent, the discontent of a people who know that abundance and the tools of progress are at last within their reach, is growing. In the words of José Figueres, “once dormant peoples are struggling upward toward the sun, toward a better life.”

If we are to meet a problem so staggering in its dimensions, our approach must itself be equally bold—an approach consistent with the majestic concept of Operation Pan America. Therefore I have called on all people of the hemisphere to join a new Alliance for Progress—Alianza para el Progreso—a vast cooperative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and nobility of purpose, to satisfy the basic needs of the American people for homes, work and land, health and schools—techo, trabajo y tierra, salud y escuela.

. . . I propose that the American republics begin on a vast new Ten Year Plan for the Americas, a plan to transform the 1960s into a historic decade of democratic progress.

These ten years will be the years of maximum progress, maximum effort, the years when the greatest obstacles must be overcome, the years when the need for assistance will be greatest.

If we are successful, if our effort is bold enough and determined enough, then the close of this decade will mark the beginning of a new era in the American experience. The living standards of every American family will be on the rise, basic education will be available to all, hunger will be a forgotten experience, the need for massive outside help will have passed, most nations will have entered a period of self-sustaining growth, and though there will be still much to do, every American republic will be the master of its own revolution and its own hope and progress.

Let me stress that only the most determined efforts of the American nations themselves can bring success to this effort. They, and they alone, can mobilize their resources, enlist the energies of their people, and modify their
social patterns so that all, and not just a privileged few, share in the fruits of growth. If this effort is made, then outside assistance will give vital impetus to progress; without it, no amount of help will advance the welfare of the people.

Thus if the countries of Latin America are ready to do their part, and I am sure they are, then I believe the United States, for its part, should help provide resources of a scope and magnitude sufficient to make this bold development plan a success—just as we helped to provide, against equal odds nearly, the resources adequate to help rebuild the economies of Western Europe. For only an effort of towering dimensions can insure fulfillment of our plan for a decade of progress...

... We propose to complete the revolution of the Americas, to build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living, and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom.

To achieve this goal, political freedom must accompany material progress. Our Alliance for Progress is an alliance of free governments, and it must work to eliminate tyranny from a hemisphere in which it has no rightful place. Therefore, let us express our special friendship to the people of Cuba and the Dominican Republic—and the hope they will soon rejoin the society of free men, uniting with us in common effort.

This political freedom must be accompanied by social change. For unless necessary social reforms, including land and tax reform, are freely made—unless we broaden the opportunity for all of our people—unless the great mass of Americans share in increasing prosperity—then our alliance, our revolution, our dream, and our freedom will fail. But we call for social change by free men—change in the spirit of Washington and Jefferson, of Bolívar and San Martín and Martí—not change which seeks to impose on men tyrannies which we cast out a century and a half ago. Our motto is what it has always been—progress yes, tyranny no—progreso sí, tiranía no!

But our greatest challenge comes from within—the task of creating an American civilization where spiritual and cultural values are strengthened by an ever-broadening base of material advance—where, within the rich diversity of its own traditions, each nation is free to follow its own path toward progress.

The completion of our task will, of course, require the efforts of all governments of our hemisphere. But the efforts of governments alone will never be enough. In the end, the people must choose and the people must help themselves.

And so I say to the men and women of the Americas—to the campesino in the fields, to the obrero in the cities, to the estudiante in the schools—prepare your mind and heart for the task ahead—call forth your strength and let each devote his energies to the betterment of all, so that your children and our children in this hemisphere can find an ever richer and a freer life.

Let us once again transform the American continent into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts—a tribute to the power of the creative energies of free men and women—an example to all the world that liberty and progress walk hand in hand. Let us once again awaken our American revolution until it guides the struggle of people everywhere—not with an imperialism of force or fear, but with the rule of courage and freedom and hope for the future of man.

“Our people share a common heritage, the quest for dignity and the freedom of man.”

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

Cuban leader Fidel Castro during a 1959 visit to New York. JFK’s mixed record in Latin America combined commitment to social progress with a failed invasion of Cuba. After Kennedy became president, the CIA formulated several attempts to assassinate Castro in Cuba. None worked. Photographs unknown.

For a period in 1961, Kennedy’s back injuries rendered him unable to climb stairs; he was forced to use a cherry picker to board airplanes. Photo, Lynn Pelham.