



A CALL FOR KNIGHTS

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A Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America:
The Pending Agenda 20 Years Later
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Good evening, my friends. It is a pleasure to be here with you. Thank you for coming.

Taking stock of Central America tonight, twenty years after we signed the Esquipulas II Accord, seeing the triumph of the free political process in a land where oppression once reigned, I feel the same delight that Don Quijote would have felt, had he ridden back into La Mancha to find everyone dressed as knights.

In 1986, when I began my first term of office as President of Costa Rica, many of those who held power in Latin America and around the world degraded democracy as antiquated and dangerous, as out of place as a medieval knight in modern times. Those who supported free elections, free assembly and free expression were too often ridiculed, tortured or killed.

As I began my second term as president last year, every country in this hemisphere but one is democratic. Those who had been ridiculed as “Quijotes,” as idealists who set out on difficult quests to fight for those ideals, and the children of those brave men and women, are now the presidents of many nations.

Twenty years ago, I too was called a “Quijote” because I thought there was a peaceful way to end the civil wars that were tearing Central America apart. That was one of the more polite things they called me. The main reason I embarked on that quixotic journey was a single, firm belief: security cannot be a prerequisite for peace, but peace is a prerequisite for security. By declaring that all violence must end before any negotiation begins, leaders give veto power to every fanatic, every person on any side of a conflict who wishes to upend the process of peace. First must come negotiation, then cease-fire, then the never-ending process of untying the knots of hatred and underdevelopment that gave rise to the conflict in the first place.

In Central America, the process of negotiation worked. The Quijotes were victorious. And tonight, we too can use this chance for dialogue to achieve real progress.

My friends, tonight I have come to ask you to join me on three new “*quijotadas*,” which is Spanish for, three new idealistic quests, where success is not just a possibility but a necessity. The three *quijotadas* are these: stopping environmental destruction, regulating the global arms trade, and using debt relief as leverage to achieve demilitarization.

First: stopping environmental destruction. I have spent my career working to stop the wars fueled by guns and ammunition, wars against humanity. But even as these scourges continue, another kind of war has raged. The sad truth is, we are at war with the very planet itself. We are blasting CO2 at the atmosphere at an unprecedented rate. We are dynamiting our oceans, we are attacking the forests that clean our air.

Environmental protection is a global responsibility, for on this small planet we are all connected. Deforestation on a coast causes flooding inland, overfishing in the North Atlantic disrupts the entire global food chain, greenhouse gases released anywhere cause global warming everywhere. My friends, human societies must be green or they will not be.

Just as fifty-nine years ago Costa Rica abolished our military and declared peace on the world, today we are dedicated to declaring "Peace with Nature," and it is time for every nation on Earth to do the same. It is time to get behind the Kyoto Protocol and move beyond the Kyoto Protocol. It is time to support alternative energy. It is time to push for greater fuel efficiency for vehicles.

And tonight I am proud to share with you Costa Rica's big goal: by 2021, our two-hundredth birthday, we will be a carbon-neutral country. By 2021, we will have eliminated more than just net carbon emissions: we will have extinguished pessimism, we will have given new energy to those brave Quijotes who have always said, "Yes, it can be done."

We should not deceive ourselves: all this will cost money. But the alternative is bankruptcy, in a financial, environmental and moral sense.

The good news is, the cause of environmental protection is not slowed so much by a lack of financial resources as it is by a lack of good priorities. In 2005 weapons spending in the developing world rose 13%, to over \$30 billion dollars. Globally, the amount spent on weapons and troops was over one trillion dollars. Why do nations continue to bleed out this money, when the very real threats of global warming, poverty, illiteracy and disease continue to strike?

The second and third *quijotadas* address this sad state of affairs.

The second *quijotada* is closing the doors on the arms trade and its vast wake of destruction. Conventional arms kill hundreds of thousands of people every year, and leave about 1.5 million disabled. 75% of global arms sales go to the developing world, and 100% happen without any binding international guidelines whatsoever.¹

The *quijotada* for a global agreement on creating accountability for arms transfers is well underway, and those that have come along for the journey are many. In 1997, eight Nobel Peace Laureates gathered in this city to propose an International Code of Conduct on arms transfers. The idea was simple: encourage countries not to transfer weapons if there is reason to believe the weapons will be used to violate human rights or international law.

Since then, a movement has gathered strength to turn the Code into a comprehensive Arms Trade Treaty, or ATT. The ATT would forbid the transfer of arms for atrocities, genocide, or crimes against humanity. It would forbid the transfer of arms

¹ "Russia Led Arms Sales to Developing World in '05." *New York Times*. 29 October 2006.

for violations of human rights or humanitarian law. It would forbid the transfer of arms if there is clear indication that they will be used to disrupt sustainable development.

It has not been easy to convince some countries to see a bottom-line measured not in dollars but in bodies, but we are making progress. Finally, last October, the United Nations First Committee decided to begin work on a draft comprehensive ATT. This *quijotada* is getting ever closer to becoming a reality. I hope we will all join together to help the treaty take the final steps of its journey.

With climate change and military spending spiraling out of control, it is time that nations refocus their budgets on the greatest threats to humanity. Tonight I would like to propose a new way for the international community to lead countries into taking this path. The third *quijotada* is this: agreeing to leverage debt relief as a tool for peace.

Earlier today, scholars, diplomats, students, government and NGO representatives came together to develop a "Costa Rica Consensus." The Costa Rica Consensus will involve new criteria for granting aid to developing nations and forgiving their debt. These criteria will not just be about level of income. They will be about disarmament and peace.

Requiring certain conditions for development aid and debt relief is obviously nothing new. Organizations such as the World Bank and IMF have long required countries to move toward balanced budgets, which is understandable. But many of these countries have done so by cutting spending on health and education, privatizing public utilities, or forgoing environmental protection. Why should we not all agree to condition debt relief on demilitarization instead? For how will the wounds of war-torn nations heal, if their governments are given money that they then directly or indirectly use to buy more grenades, helicopters and AK-47s, perpetuating the poverty of their people?

It is time that we create mechanisms to forgive the debt of developing nations that invest less in soldiers and weapons, and more in education, health and environmental protection. It is time that the international financial community reward not only those who use resources efficiently, as it has done till now, but also those who use resources morally. That is the Costa Rica Consensus. I hope that we will all begin to give it life.

My friends,

As we think about these *quijotadas*, we should remember the words of a modern-day Quijote, Winston Churchill. He said:

"Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb."

I hope you will decide to join me on the three difficult but imperative quests I have mentioned this evening. In the case of global climate change, an uncontrolled trade in arms, and reckless military spending, we must not allow ourselves to be fooled by illusions. These problems are not Don Quijote's innocent windmills: they are ogres, ogres that will only be restrained by international treaties, only be slain by intelligent debt relief, only be vanquished by alternative energy.

Having witnessed incredible interest and energy today for slaying these demons, I think we're going to do it. For I have seen what we have done together already. Together, we reduced the hole in the ozone layer. Together, we ended the civil wars in Central America. Together, we brought democracy to Latin America and around the world. The same tools that made this possible are still ours today: dialogue, consensus, compromise. Let us make use of them, and boldly embark on our quest.

When we embark on this quest, when we acknowledge that the world is in crisis and decide to lend a hand in any way we can, when peace is no longer an incidental outcome of our work but an all-encompassing destiny, then we will no longer be just politicians, or diplomats, or scholars, or students. If you are ready to ride out on this quest, no matter what specific direction you choose, then when you leave this room tonight, each and every one of you will find yourself a knight.

Thank you very much.