

**OPENING STATEMENT
SENATOR RICHARD G. LUGAR
SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
NOMINATION HEARING OF ROGER NORIEGA
May 1, 2003**

The Foreign Relations Committee welcomes Mr. Roger Noriega this morning. He is well known to many of us in this room, having served on the Committee staff from 1997 to 2001. The nominee is presently the Permanent Representative of the United States to the Organization of American States (OAS), a post for which the Senate confirmed him in July 2001. In addition, Mr. Noriega has served in positions at USAID, as an advisor to the Secretary General of the OAS, as a member of the staff of the House Committee on International Relations, and as a staffer for a Member of Congress from his home State of Kansas.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts on policy toward Latin America and engaging you in a discussion of recent developments in our own Hemisphere.

I want to thank all members of this Committee for cooperating on the scheduling of this hearing. We are trying to accomplish a lot this month and this is a busy time for us all. Senator Biden, as ranking member of the Committee, and Senator Coleman, as chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, have been helpful in moving us to this point. I especially would like to thank Senator Dodd. His constant attention to issues pertaining to Latin America has strengthened this Committee and its work for many years. Few members in the history of the Senate have contributed more to relations with Latin America than Senator Dodd, and he always has had a keen interest in the position for which Mr. Noriega has been nominated. I know that he and his staff have put a great deal of work into this process and could have used more time. But Senator Dodd understands how important it is to move forward with our work, and when I talked to him about holding this hearing at an early date, he was completely supportive.

The State Department needs an Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Even as our attention is focused on Iraq, North Korea, and other hot spots on the global landscape, Latin America is going through a critical period right now. In Venezuela, democratic governance is under severe strain. Next door in Colombia where American military assets are engaged, violence and drug production dominate large sections of the country. Argentina's economy has been in collapse for several years, while Brazil's financial situation is difficult. In the aftermath of September 11, alleged terrorist activities and the transit of drugs in the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, present a troubling, and as yet un-quantified, security concern. Though democracy reigns in most of the Caribbean, it remains at risk in Haiti and is non-existent in Cuba. Chile and Mexico sit on the U.N. Security Council with the potential to exercise extraordinary influence in that body. And we continue to deal with a host of economic, environmental, and immigration issues with our neighbors to the south.

President Bush and Secretary Powell have visited the region several times, and they have supported important initiatives in the region. They recognize, as we do, the tremendous potential

of Latin America and the advancements for democracy that have occurred in the last two decades. Negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Central American countries are in the works, and negotiations with Chile for another free trade agreement have concluded. But more attention to the region is required. The United States must recommit itself to engaging all of Latin America. We can begin by addressing the important nomination before us.

I want to underscore for all members of this Committee that our actions in dealing with nominations have consequences. Foreign governments carefully watch how this Committee addresses nominees with responsibility for their region. The absence of high ranking State Department officials or Ambassadors for extended periods can weaken relations with other nations, hinder our ability to gather accurate information, and hurt the morale of affected staff.

This does not mean that we have to rubber stamp the President's selections. We should proceed carefully and thoughtfully when we evaluate diplomatic nominations. But we should proceed with dispatch. Nominations must not be delayed by inattention, bureaucratic arguments, or political motivations. The Senate nomination process is already more cumbersome than it should be. We must ensure that our Committee does not unnecessarily lengthen the process.

Mr. Noriega, before turning to you for your opening statement, I would like to recognize Senator for any comments our friend may have.

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