

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos Sees His Country Emerging as Regional Leader

His Excellency Juan Manuel Santos Calderón
President
Republic of Colombia

May 18, 2017

Excerpts from President Santos' Remarks

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Let's talk about something that you have done that won you the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016. [Applause.] So to set the stage, you became President in 2010. And you began a secret process to negotiate with the FARC¹. So how hard was it to keep it secret?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It was very hard. But it was a test for the FARC of how serious they were. Because many Presidents had tried the same. My predecessor and many of the other Presidents had tried. And the FARC had never been really committed to the peace process. They wanted to use the negotiations to strengthen themselves and to gain political leverage. So this time I said: We will negotiate the agenda, which is 50 percent of any negotiation – completely secret. That took about two years. And they kept the secret. And that, to me, was very reassuring on their commitment this time to the peace process.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What is the essence of the agreement with FARC?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It's the first agreement that has put the victims in the center of the solution. Their rights – their rights to the truth. Many times the victims, the only thing they demand is the truth – why did you do this or that? The rights to reparations. We've been repairing more than 600,000 victims already. The rights to justice, transitional justice. And the right to non-repetition. This is the first agreement that puts the victims at the center of the solution. This has made this agreement very unique and very comprehensive. There are many analysts around the world that have studied different peace agreements in the last decade, who say this is the most comprehensive and most complete agreement signed so far.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But today [drug] production is still as high as it was a year or so ago, or maybe even increasing. So – OK, so it's going to take a long time before the production goes down, I assume.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No, not a long time.... So far this year, we have eradicated 15,000 hectares, which was the number of hectares we eradicated in the whole of last year. I have my Minister of the Post Conflict, who has already negotiated with 80,000 families the substitution of the drug. So I think that in a year's time we'll have 100,000 hectares less of coca plantation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is coffee still the biggest export?

¹ FARC is The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. Right now our biggest sector is oil. Coffee used to be 50, 60 percent. Now it's less than 10 percent. But it's still very important in the rural areas. Still the most important agricultural product. And we still produce the best coffee in the world.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: If I'm a businessman and I wanted to invest in Colombia, what would be the good things for me to buy?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, we are making a revolution in our infrastructure. And you can invest part of your portfolio in infrastructure. Tourism. If there is a potential in Colombia, it's tourism. And in every country that has any tourism potential that has an armed conflict, what has grown the most after the conflict ends is tourism. And we have a tremendous variety of tourist attractions. Something that is getting very popular, many of the U.S. companies are investing there, health – health services.

We have a tremendous opportunity in the agribusiness. I say that in a way because of the conflict half of the country was not exploited. With the peace process, you now have half the country to do what you did in the West in the 19th century, you know? Conquer or – not only conquer, but develop. And there is a tremendous opportunity there in agribusiness.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What would you like to accomplish in your remaining 14 ½ months in office?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, first of all, finish consolidating the peace process. This is absolutely essential. But that's not only what I'm working at. I have chosen education as the number-one priority in my government. [Applause.] The budget for education for the first time in our history for the last four years has been the biggest part of our national budget. We want to be the best-educated country in Latin America for year 2025. And we are trying to reach that.

Poverty. We have brought down poverty more than any other country in Latin America in the last five or six years, for 5.2 million Colombians have been lifted out of poverty. And we are doing a huge investment in technology. We connected every municipality in Colombia with fiber optics and broadband, to use technology as a driver in our economy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So what would you like most Americans to know about Colombia?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, that we are the most important strategic ally that the U.S. has in Latin America. That we've been – [applause] – we have been together for many, many years. We fought together in the Korean War. We are working together to help Central America fight the organized crime. We did together the – what I think – the most successful bipartisan foreign policy initiative that the U.S. has launched in the recent past. Colombia was on the verge of being a failed state in the early beginning of the century, only 16, 17 years ago. Today it's a flourishing country, one of the top performers of Latin America. That is thanks to Plan Colombia, in big part. So we are good partners. We share the same values, the same principles.

I'm going tomorrow to – as you mentioned – to speak at the commencement of my son at the university that was founded by Thomas Jefferson, who had a tremendous influence in our Founding Fathers. So we have a great many things that we can work together. And what I told President Trump today, your strategic interests of the U.S. are much more in Latin America, south of the Rio Grande, than many parts of the world that you are so interested in. And I believe that. And if you look south, if you take into account more what Latin America represents – we're not the backyard, we're the front yard of the U.S. – we will be much better off.

[Applause.]

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: [Sounds gavel.] I want to welcome members and guests of The Economic Club of Washington to this dinner event in the Grand Ballroom of the JW Marriott Washington, D.C., Hotel. We're very honored to have as our special guest His Excellency Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, the President of the Republic of Colombia. [Applause.] Thank you.

President Santos, thank you very much for coming. I think most people probably know President Santos' background, but for those who don't he's a native of Bogota, went to private school there, then went to join the Navy. Following that, he went to a Naval Academy – the equivalent of our Naval Academy – and then served in the Navy for several additional years. He came to the United States to study at the University of Kansas, where he earned an undergraduate degree in business. He then went to the London School of Economics, where he got a master's degree while also working for the National Federation of Colombian Coffee Exchange and Producers in London.

He came back to the United States and earned a degree from the Kennedy School at Harvard. After that, he returned to his native country, worked in his family's newspaper business, and ultimately became a journalist there and also deputy publisher. He then won a Neiman Fellowship to go back to Harvard for another year. After that he went back to Colombia, got involved in the government, and ultimately became the first trade minister of Colombia. Subsequently he became the finance minister of Colombia. And then, in 2010, he ran for President of the country and won. He was reelected in 2014. And I guess you're allowed to serve only two terms in Colombia, so he's finishing his last term.

President Santos has three children. His wife was unable to be here this evening, but he is going tomorrow to give the commencement address at the University of Virginia, where his son is going to be graduating. So congratulations. [Applause.]

So you met with President Trump today. [Laughter.] So was he preoccupied with anything else, or did he focus on what you had to say?

PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS CALDERÓN: He had no trouble. He was very calm, very focused. And I was surprised how open he was, how generous he was. Very cordial. We managed to sort of make a good chemistry. And I know about his problems, and everybody knows about his problems, but he was very, very focused on the Colombians.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So how would you compare your meetings with him with your meeting with President Obama? [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, it's like if you meet Claudia Schieffer or Naomi Campbell. It's very different. Very different. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Different styles? Different styles, OK. So let's talk about something that you have done that won you the Nobel Peace Prize. I should have mentioned that, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016. [Applause.] So to set the stage, you became President

in 2010. And you began a secret process to negotiate with the FARC². So how hard was it to keep it secret?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It was very hard. But it was a test for the FARC of how serious they were. Because many Presidents had tried the same. My predecessor and many of the other Presidents had tried. And the FARC had never – had never been really committed to the peace process. They wanted to use the negotiations to strengthen themselves and to gain political leverage. So this time I said: We will negotiate the agenda, which is 50 percent of any negotiation – completely secret. That took about two years. And they kept the secret. And that, to me, was very reassuring on their commitment this time to the peace process.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So the secret negotiations, were they in Cuba, or was that in Colombia?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Some in Cuba. Most of them in Cuba, and some in Colombia.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So when it became public that you were in these negotiations, did it become very controversial in Colombia?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Yes. Yes, because I got elected President because I was a very effective Minister of Defense. And the FARC received the biggest blows militarily. We took down their number one, number two –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Under something you did. You led a bombing in Ecuador that killed the head of FARC.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: One of the members of the secretariat. It's like their board of directors.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: But then to change the policy and sit down with them, many people didn't understand that. They wanted to continue to see if they could exterminate the FARC, which was impossible. Colombia is a country ideal for guerilla warfare, full of mountains, jungles. And that would have – would have taken 20 or 30 years more. But what we needed was to weaken the FARC in order to sit them at the negotiating table, because in today's world any asymmetrical war has to be terminated through negotiations.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So this war had gone on for 52 years. And so during the negotiations you ultimately reached an agreement with FARC. But then you decided to put it to a plebiscite, a popular vote. And it lost. Why did it lose?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Big mistake. Big mistake.

² FARC is The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Big mistake? They voted wrong or that you shouldn't have had a plebiscite.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Both. [Laughter.] To make peace is much, much more difficult than making war. Making war is relatively easy, because leadership during war is very straightforward. The other guys are the enemies, rallying the forces around you. And if you win, you become very popular. But making peace means you have to change the perceptions, the attitudes of people, people who have suffered have to forgive or at least reconcile. And that takes a lot of effort.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So the agreement was turned down by less than 1 percent. So then you renegotiated the agreement. But after you renegotiated the agreement, you didn't go back for a plebiscite. You just went to your Congress. Why was that?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, first of all, our laws and our legal structure did not oblige me to go to a plebiscite. That was my own sort of obsession. And it was a mistake. And legally, I didn't have to go back to a plebiscite. It's Congress that approves these type of agreements. That's in our constitution, in our laws. So I decided to go through Congress. And it was approved by an overwhelming majority.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, you were the Minister of Defense under President Uribe, who was your predecessor. And he opposed the FARC agreement. So wasn't that awkward, your predecessor, for whom you used to work, was opposed to it, and he led the opposition. So was that a little awkward? You didn't go to a lot of dinner parties with him, I assume, at that time? [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, you know, the classics have written that the struggle for power is what brings the best and the worst to the human condition. That's politics. So that is politics. He also wanted to do what I did. He searched for a peace agreement with the FARC. He did not succeed. And so he's now opposed. Well, that's what politics is.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And he's still opposed.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: He's still opposed.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So when you were told you got the Nobel Peace Prize – now, normally they call people up in the morning. They wake them up or something. Did they – how did they – they can't wake up the President of a country so easily. So how did they tell you?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No, my son woke me up. And I thought it was a joke. And I – it was 4:00 in the morning. I had had the night before a long dinner. [Laughter.] I was very, very much asleep. And I thought it was a joke. And I said, don't bother me right now. And I hung up the phone. And then he went to my room. And he said: Dad, you won the Nobel Prize. Really? And then I realized I did.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Wow. OK. Well, that was a pretty big honor to go over there. But the problem was, you won it after the vote to turn it down. So wasn't that awkward?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. It was a gift from God. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Because it made people realize they should –

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Of course. And it was a great stimulus to continue and persevere in the search for peace.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. For people who don't really understand the intricacies of this agreement, which has many different parts, what is the essence of it?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It's the first agreement that has put the victims in the center of the solution. Their rights – their rights to the truth. Many times the victims, the only thing they demand is the truth – why did you do this or that? The rights to reparations. We've been repairing more than 600,000 victims already. The rights to justice, transitional justice. And the right to non-repetition. This is the first agreement that puts the victims at the center of the solution. This has made this agreement very unique and very comprehensive. There are many analysts around the world that have studied different peace agreements in the last decade, say this is the most comprehensive and most complete agreement signed so far.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So under the agreement, the FARC are supposed to turn their weapons in. They're going to be melted down for some monument. But have they actually turned their weapons in yet?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: At this very moment they are giving their weapons to the United Nations – at this moment.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But how do you actually know – like, if they give a gun, how do you know they don't have an extra gun somewhere? [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, there's also the risk. But if they have the extra gun and we catch them, they will lose all the benefits of the transitional justice.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. But do any of the people who are members of FARC, could they still – even if they give the guns in and everything – they still can go to jail. Is that correct or not?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Yes. If they don't say the truth, if they, you know, in any way don't comply with the rules of the transitional justice, then they will be judged under ordinary justice. They can go to jail for long term.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So was it harder to negotiate with FARC, or with your own government and the people in the regular establishment of Colombia?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Depends on the timing. It's very difficult to articulate a group in a situation so complex as terminating a war of half a century. There are many, many aspects that you have to take into account. So many times the big problem was sort of coordinating the group – the country, rallying public opinion behind the peace agreement. And of course, negotiating with an enemy that you've had for so long, and trying to build confidence. It's been very difficult, but I think worthwhile.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So your country is a country of roughly 49 million people, something like that. So how many members were there of FARC? How big an organization was it?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Armed people, they have 7,000 – around 7,000. They are right now concentrated in specific areas. And they have a similar number of militias – a bit smaller – but militias around the country.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So today, when your term is up in government, somebody is going to obviously run and be the next President. And if a person runs who is against the FARC agreement that you have, could the agreement be undone, in effect?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. This is irreversible because, first of all, nobody in their right mind will give back the weapons to the FARC for them to go back to the jungle and continue the war. On the other hand, we have established in our constitution some transitional articles that guarantee the compliance with the agreement, not at a legal level but at a constitutional level.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Well, let's assume the agreement stays in effect and so forth. But aren't there still a lot of people who are not members of FARC, who are producing drugs and they're being imported in the United States. How are you going to deal with all the drug production?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: That's – law and order. You have to be effective from the law and order perspective. If you want to ask me, why has the coca production increased in Colombia, I would say I thought that the agreement was going to last – the negotiations were going to last three, maximum four years. They lasted six years. And the first item that I imposed on the FARC that we had to agree on is narcotics, the drug trafficking, because they were the problem and they have to be part of the solution. And people started to see that this is a major part of the agreement. And they said, oh, they're going to buy us out, the coca peasants. So they said, they're going to buy us out, let's increase the production so we're bought with more production. And that's what caused that.

But now we have in place a very unique and, for the first time – first time – a policy to substitute permanently the coca plantations. Because before, with the help of the U.S., we went to the coca plantations either spraying or physically, at a very high cost. We couldn't stay there, because we did not control the territory. And the day after, they simply replanted. And you were like in a static bicycle – pedaling and pedaling, and you didn't progress. Right now, because of the peace agreement, you have this unique opportunity to reduce the production of

drugs out of Colombia and become not the first, hopefully a very minor exporter of coca in the world markets.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But today the production is still as high as it was a year or so ago, or maybe even increasing. So – OK, so it's going to take a long time before the production goes down, I assume.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No, not a long time. For example, I have a my Minister of Defense here. He's very keen. We're monitoring week by week. So far this year, we have eradicated 15,000 hectares, which was the number of hectares we eradicated in the whole of last year. And I have my Minister of the Post Conflict, who has already negotiated with 80,000 families the substitution of the drug. So I think that in a year's time we'll have 100,000 hectares less of coca plantation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So for people who care about the price of cocaine in the United States, this is going to increase the price of cocaine. [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: I hope it does. I hope it does.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. All right. So anybody who might care about. [Laughter.] OK, so by the way, your Minister of Defense, he's not going to run for President with the opposite party's positions – I mean, you ran against your mentor, and will he run against you or against your positions?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. I ran, he supported me. And when I named my ministers, then he didn't like them very much, so he started opposing my ministers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When you were growing up, the biggest export of Colombia was coffee, I assume.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And is that still the biggest export?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. Right now our biggest sector is oil. Coffee used to be 50, 60 percent. Now it's less than 10 percent. But it's still very important in the rural areas. Still the most important agricultural product. And we still produce the best coffee in the world.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Best coffee. So Juan Valdez is still –

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Absolutely. [Applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. OK. So let's talk about this. You're growing up in Bogota. You're a member of the Navy. And then why did you decide to go to a place that's landlocked? Kansas

is not a place where you can do a lot of naval stuff. [Laughter.] So why did you go to University of Kansas? There's no ships there.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: As you mentioned, my family was in a newspaper business. My father was a very good friend of the then-publisher of the *Miami Herald*. His name was George Beebe. And he went to stay at my house. And one of my older brothers wanted to study journalism here in the U.S. And he asked George Beebe: Where should I go study? And he said, listen, you can go to an Ivy League university. But if you want to get to know the real America, go to one of the best schools of journalism, which is located at the University of Kansas. It's in the middle of nowhere, but you will really appreciate what the American environment is. If you don't like it, you can transfer.

He went there. He fell in love with the campus, with the university. It's a great university. Great basketball team. [Laughter.] And he said, to me when I graduated, listen, come here. You'll love this university. And that was true. I went there. And I loved that university.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And after the first winter you still loved it? After you were used to Bogota? [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It has its compensations. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So you graduate. Then you went to the London School of Economics (LSE). So why did you just go over there?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Because the LSE was sort of the mecca of economists. And I always wanted to study in London. I always wanted to study at the LSE. I finally got accepted. So I went and studied there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So you then when to the Kennedy School. Did you parents say, well, this kid likes a lot of degrees. You're going to different schools. [Laughter.] You parent didn't say you're going to too many schools, or they didn't say that?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. They liked that I liked to study. And at the Kennedy School they liked not only that I wanted to study, but that I was a Fulbright Fellow, so they didn't have to pay for the tuition. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh, OK. So after you got your degree, you then went back to your family newspaper, is that right?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: I went back to –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And your family still owns the paper, or?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No, we sold it about six years ago. I think at the best time possible.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: At the top of the market.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Yes. I think it was a good sale.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So then you're at your newspaper. Then you get a Neiman Fellowship to go back to Harvard. And you spent a year there. But then when you came back, why did you decide to go into government and not go back to the newspaper?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: That's a good question. [Laughter.] When somebody I respect very much – when I was offered to go into public life, become a Minister. And that, in my family, meant that I would never be the publisher. I was deputy publisher, but if you go to public life you don't come back. That's family rules. So I went to this person, and I said: What do you recommend? And they said, listen, I know you very well. You as a publisher will have a lot of influence. And that's what publishers, and especially our newspaper, which is the biggest newspaper in Colombia, or used to be – or, it used to be our newspaper. It's still the biggest newspaper in Colombia. There's a difference between influence and power. Power is when you sign a decree and say you name somebody or you establish policy. And I think you will be happier with power than with influence. And that made a difference.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So they created a Ministry for Foreign Trade, I guess, is that right? And you became the first Minister?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And did you have a background in that area?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, I studied economics. And it was a combination of many things, because we were a very closed economy. And to open the economy, you needed not only to know about trade, but also a bit about politics, because you needed to convince many people – all the industrial complex – that they are going to be exposed to competition. That – nobody likes competition. And so it was a very interesting transition. But it was necessary for my government. And Colombia today is a different country, among other things, because of that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So you then became Minister of Finance and then Minister of Defense. Did you have – you had a background in defense because you'd been in the Navy.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So which of those three jobs was the better – the best of those three?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, the Ministry of Finance was a very tough job because I was named Minister of Finance in the worst recession we've had in the last hundred years. So I had to take very tough decisions, very unpopular. They used to burn my picture in every plaza in Colombia. My kids were small. They said: Dad, why are they burning you in every plaza?

And I said, oh, don't worry kids, the smoke goes up into heaven, so God is with us. [Laughter.] And it was very difficult.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Did they believe that? OK. [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: It was very difficult. But what I learned there is it's very important to do the correct thing, no matter if it's unpopular. And that's why I made the peace process. It was the correct thing, even though it was unpopular.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But – all right, so you had not run for office. And usually people who run for office – not always, and we have some history in our country of somebody running for office who's never run for office before – but you had never run for office before. What did your family say when you said I'm going to run for President?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, if my father had been alive, he would have said no. My brothers had no say. So I just had myself. [Laughs.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. All right. So let's talk about your country for a moment. Your country – maybe not well-known to many people – but the biodiversity of that country is extraordinary. So I think you have more species of birds than any other country in the entire world. How does that happen?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: A gift from God. [Laughter.] Colombia is a very unique country, a very beautiful country. I mean, it has – for example, we have more water, more rivers, than the U.S., without Alaska. More rivers than India. We have jungles that are so dense that they carry the highest biodiversity or the biggest biodiversity you can find in the whole world. And we have very different climates. One of the regions in Colombia is the region where it rains the most in the whole world. So that creates a very special biodiversity. And we have not only the biggest variety of birds, but the biggest variety of butterflies, of frogs. There's a –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You have more butterfly species than any other country in the world?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: We're on the top. Some people say there's more in Colombia than any other country. Some say more in Brazil than Colombia. But we're in the top.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So in these jungles and the forests, do you have people from, like, the Stone Ages that are still living there, you don't know?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: We have some very remote indigenous people, yes. And we protect them. And this is part of our culture. And it's part of our richness. We think that diversity is a strength, not a weakness. [Applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So why is your country named after a man who actually never visited the country? How did you get the name Colombia, because Columbus never got that close there, did he?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: [Laughs.] Well, but he got close enough. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Close enough? OK. OK. So talk about the country that's next to yours, Venezuela. How is Venezuela's surviving?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: How is Venezuela surviving? That's a very good question. [Laughter.] It's a very difficult situation. And for us, for Colombia, it's very worrisome, because we are the country that has more to win or to lose with whatever happens in Venezuela. We have a border of 2,200 kilometers, light border. We have more than 3 million Colombians that are living in Venezuela.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Have you considered a wall between those two? [Laughter.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No. We don't build walls.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh, you don't build walls? OK.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: No, we don't build walls. [Applause.] And we are very interested in a peaceful, hopefully democratic, transition. And we're pushing for that, because if there's violence in Venezuela, everybody will lose. We're trying to avoid violence. And we're trying to stimulate a democratic, peaceful transition. Very difficult with a regime that wants to hang onto power no matter what. But we're pushing. We're trying to rally other countries – the U.S. and many other countries – to see if we can facilitate that transition.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is the U.S. helping Venezuela by buying a lot of the oil for cash?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, it's the only country, I think, who's paying cash for the oil. And I'll leave it there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. [Laughter.] So today, if I wanted to invest in Colombia and make an investment, what would be the best area to invest in? If I'm a businessman and I wanted to invest in Colombia, what would be the good things for me to buy?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, we are making a revolution in our infrastructure. And you can invest part of your portfolio in infrastructure. Tourism. If there is a potential in Colombia, it's tourism. And in every country that has any tourism potential that has an armed conflict, what has grown the most after the conflict ends is tourism. And we have a tremendous variety of tourist attractions. Something that is getting very popular, many of the U.S. companies are investing there, health – health services.

We have a tremendous opportunity in the agribusiness. I say that in a way because of the conflict half of the country was not exploited. With the peace process, you now have half the country to do what you did in the West in the 19th century, you know? Conquer or – not only conquer, but develop. And there is a tremendous opportunity there in agribusiness.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how many more months do you have as President now?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Fourteen and a half.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Fourteen – not counting, but 14 ½, OK. [Laughter.] So what would you like to accomplish in the remaining 14 ½ months?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, first of all, finish consolidating the peace process. This is absolutely essential. But that's not only what I'm working at. I have chosen education as the number-one priority in my government. [Applause.] The budget for education for the first time in our history for the last four years has been the biggest part of our national budget. We want to be the best educated country in Latin America for year 2025. And we are trying to reach that.

Poverty. We have brought down poverty more than any other country in Latin America in the last five or six years, for 5.2 million Colombians have been lifted out of poverty. And we are doing a huge investment in technology. We connected every municipality in Colombia with fiber optics and broadband, to use technology as a driver in our economy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So if I wanted to go visit a place in Latin America, if I go to someplace like – you can go see the Galapagos. There's a place that Ecuador has. And then you can go to other great – the Amazon in Brazil, forest. What's the biggest tourist attraction that you have? Why would somebody want to go to Colombia right now?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: We have this tremendous privilege of, what do you want, we have it. [Laughter.] You want to go to the Amazon jungle? We have a beautiful Amazon jungle. You want beaches? You have beautiful beaches. You want, for example, the coffee region – I'll take you one day there, and go to a coffee farm. You sleep there. You pick your own coffee. You roast it there. You come back, and you invite your friends to coffee that you picked and you roasted. That's a great experience. And there are many things in Colombia to do for tourists.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So when you finish your term as President, you're still relatively young for being a former President, so –

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Thank you. Thank you very much. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So what would – now, in your country, is there a tradition of – some countries, like Mexico, very often the President leaves the country for a while – not always. In your country is the tradition that the President goes there or goes into business or doesn't go into business? What's more normal in your country?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Some have gone into business, but I don't think it's correct. You know, I think that a former President should not go into business. I want to be a teacher. That's what I want to be. I want to go and teach at the school – [applause] –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. In Colombia or the United States or?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Maybe Colombia and the United States.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And now that you've had the Nobel Peace Prize, that gives you entrée to lots of places. So are you going to work on various other peace endeavors?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Probably, yes. Probably, yes. I think the experience we've had in Colombia is a unique experience, that it would be a pity not to share it with other countries and other conflicts. And I think what we learned with the Colombian experience is something that is important for the world to take into account and take advantage of. And it would be very selfish from our part not to share it with the rest of the world.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So what would you like most Americans to know about Colombia?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Well, that we are the most important strategic ally that the U.S. has in Latin America. That we've been – [applause] – we have been together for many, many years. We fought together in the Korean War. We are working together to help Central American fight the organized crime. We did together the – what I think – the most successful bipartisan foreign policy initiative that the U.S. has launched in the recent past. Colombia was on the verge of being a failed state in the early beginning of the century, only 16, 17 years ago. Today it's a flourishing country, one of the top performers of Latin America. That is thanks to Plan Colombia, in big part. So we are good partners. We share the same values, the same principles.

I'm going tomorrow to – as you mentioned – to speak at the commencement of my son at the university that was founded by Thomas Jefferson, who had a tremendous influence in our Founding Fathers. So we have a great many things that we can work together. And what I told President Trump today, your strategic interests of the U.S. are much more in Latin America, south of the Rio Grande, than many parts of the world that you are so interested in. And I believe that. And if you look south, if you take into account more what Latin America represents – we're not the backyard, we're the front yard of the U.S. – we will be much better off. [Applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So for those who may not be going tomorrow to hear your address, can you give us a hint? What are you going to say about Thomas Jefferson or – in your address, or anything you're going to say tomorrow?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: I'm going to talk to them about the importance of failure, how important it is to fail and learn about failing in order to be successful. [Applause.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And if any of your children came to you and said, I want to run for office, what would you tell them?

PRESIDENT SANTOS: I would say don't be so crazy. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Mr. President, you've done a terrific job for Colombia. And I want to thank you very much for coming this evening and giving us your insights. Thank you. [Applause.]

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Thank you. Thank you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I have a gift for you, on behalf of the members of The Economic Club of Washington, a copy of the first map of the original District of Columbia.

PRESIDENT SANTOS: Thank you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Thank you very much. You did a great job. Thank you all.

His Excellency Juan Manuel Santos Calderón **President** **Republic of Colombia**



JUAN MANUEL SANTOS CALDERÓN
PRESIDENTE DE LA REPÚBLICA DE COLOMBIA
2010-2018

Born in Bogota on August 10, 1951. He was a cadet at the Naval Academy in Cartagena; he studied Economics and Business Administration at the University of Kansas, and graduate studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Harvard University.

He was Chief of the Colombian delegation to the International Coffee Organization (ICO) in London. He was the last Designate to the Presidency, and Colombia's first Foreign Trade Minister. He also served as Finance Minister and National Defense Minister. During this later post, he led the implementation of the government's Democratic Security Policy.

Mr. Santos created the Good Government Foundation (*Fundación Buen Gobierno*) and founded the *Partido de la U* political party in 2005, currently Colombia's largest political party.

As a journalist, he was a columnist and Deputy Director of *El Tiempo* newspaper; he was awarded the King of Spain Prize and served as president of the Freedom of Expression Commission for the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA). He has published several books,

among which the most significant are “The Third Way,” co-authored with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and “Check on Terror” (“*Jaque al Terror*”), where he describes the most important actions against the FARC guerrillas during his tenure as Minister of Defense.

On June 20, 2010—after winning the first round of the presidential elections held on May 30 that same year—he was elected in the balloting as President of the Republic of Colombia for the four-year period between August 7, 2010, and August 7, 2014. He received over 9 million votes, the highest ever obtained by any candidate in the history of Colombian democracy. During his campaign, he promised to lead a national unity government to carry out the transition from Democratic Security to Democratic Prosperity.

In August 2012, he publicly announced that his government was working on a peace process with the FARC. On June 15, 2014, in the balloting and with more than 7.8 million votes, he was reelected as President of the Republic for the 2014–2018 constitutional term, with a government plan based on three pillars: Peace, Equity, and Education.

Thanks to his tenacity and dedication to achieve peace and reconciliation in Colombia, in 2016 the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize for his “resolute efforts” to bring the armed conflict to an end. The Nobel Committee added that the distinction “is a tribute to the Colombian people who, despite great hardships and abuses, have not given up hope of a just peace, and to all the parties who have contributed to the peace process”.

For Juan Manuel Santos, Nobel Peace Laureate, peace has been a driver throughout his life. The Nobel Peace Prize summarizes a trajectory, Mr. Santos’ relentless interest in pursuing peace for Colombia. In the 90s, an optimist as he has always been, he said that peace was around the corner, but war prevailed, filling the country with victims. Today, he reiterates, peace is closer than ever. And yes, Colombia’s time for peace has come.

2017 has been a year of new acknowledgments for the Colombian President. In January, he received the Global Statesman Award during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, for his efforts for peace in Colombia and his distinguished career as world leader. Upon receiving the award at the economic event, President Santos pointed out that this award was a recognition for the Colombian people, for their resilience throughout the war the country has lived.

In April, *Time* magazine included him in the 2017 list of the 100 most influential public figures in the world, among other leaders such as Pope Francis and British Prime Minister Theresa May. The Colombian President was the only Latin American leader included in this year’s list.

President Santos is married to María Clemencia Rodríguez, with whom he has three children: Martín, María Antonia, and Esteban.