

An Open Letter from One Banana Republican to Another Banana Republican

Santiago Padilla DeBorst

February 11, 2021

Dear Mr. President,

We are both Americans. We are both descendants of immigrants. We are both US citizens. We are both residents of Banana Republics, even though I suspect neither of us shop at the store.

You split your time between Delaware and Washington. I immigrated to Central America in 1990 but

A father of many and husband of one, Santiago Padilla DeBorst has made Latin America his home. As a member of Casa Adobe and through his leadership in CETI, he strives to pull together what never should have been set apart: Christian faith and political insight, Christian values and economics, Christian theology and everyday life.



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still get back to Michigan regularly. Today, I write from Costa Rica, where we grow bananas and have universal public health care. Today, I write as an American, the Central American I have become over the years. Today, I write thinking of my Latin American *compañeros* and neighbors.

Congratulations on your November 3, 2020 election, on the media confirming your popular vote victory on November 6, on the individual states certifying (despite many legal challenges) your victory by “safe harbor day” on December 8, on your official election by the electors of your Electoral College on December 14, on the US Congress being able to finally count and certify the vote of the electors early on the morning of January 7, 2021, and on your inauguration on January 20. It was a beautiful ceremony; I especially appreciated the songs and poetry. The election of President Carlos Alvarado of Costa Rica was officially confirmed by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal at 8:37 pm on April 1, 2018, the same day of the vote. He rode his bike to his inauguration here in San José, Costa Rica. I understand security was a little tighter in Washington, DC during your inauguration, but I digress.

January 6,
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January 6, 2021 changed everything; before that day, I was writing a different kind of letter.

Dates mean a lot to us Americans, as you well know. September 11, 2001 is said to have changed everything. It certainly changed a lot, though maybe

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not everything; some of us children of immigrants tend to embellish a bit.

September 11, 1973 certainly changed a lot in Chile. That's the date they lost their democracy to foreign intervention even though, rather than growing bananas, they mine copper. But I'll try to stick to my beloved Banana Republics.

April 13, 1903 certainly changed a lot in Honduras. That's the date the coup led by General Manuel Bonilla succeeded. His government replaced the duly elected president that the Honduran Congress selected in a legal procedure established by their constitution. In a second coup led by a United States citizen, Lee Christmas—at the head of a mercenary army—the dictator Bonilla returned to power in 1912.

December 2, 1931 certainly changed a lot in El Salvador. That's the date a candidate who had withdrawn from the presidential elections earlier that year and was later named vice-president—Maximiliano Hernández Martínez—led a self-coup and prevented the constitutionally elected president from serving his term. Despite a focus on coffee and cotton, El Salvador is often accused of being a Banana Republic.

June 9, 1936 certainly changed a lot in Nicaragua. That's the date a general installed by a foreign power forced the president to resign, and the Somoza family began its dynastic dictatorship.

June 27, 1954 certainly changed a lot in Guatemala. That's the date the coup led by the CIA and the

United Fruit Company succeeded in ending democracy in the Republic of Guatemala.

March 1, 1948 certainly changed a lot in Costa Rica. That's the date Congress annulled a presidential election, and within days the country erupted in civil war.

So, the Banana Republics are fully acquainted with the elements at play on January 6, 2021 and in the days and months leading up to insurrection.

Honduras, often referred to as the original Banana Republic, had allowed the development of an enclave that lived divorced from the reality of the rest of the country but felt privileged enough to make and break the rules by which the nation would live. Its new dictator, Manuel Bonilla, went so far as to lock up his political opponent and use armed militias to disrupt the electoral process. And, even after losing power once, he schemed to return to the presidency. El Salvador experienced a self-coup led by a (then-vice-) president who believed in wild conspiracy theories and shared them with the nation on the radio, the Twitter of the twentieth century. Nicaragua was governed by a general more responsive to a foreign embassy than to his own president, which brings to mind the recently pardoned General Flynn's relationship with the Russian ambassador. Somoza's children were also active in business and politics; they, too, dreamed of continuing their father's legacy. The coup in Guatemala became the template for professional coup-makers. The CIA pumped out

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fake news in Guatemala; the Rupert Murdochs of the day spread it in a United States busy demonizing Reds rather than the Red Man, Blacks, and Browns. Costa Rica's civil war wasn't just a sick, naive dream printed up on t-shirts; it was a brief yet painful nightmare fought by militias armed and encouraged by a variety of foreign actors. The crowd that was determined to break down the doors of democracy in Washington, DC on January 6 bore a striking resemblance to those who have devastated our nations and destroyed our fledging republics over the years. As your fellow Democratic president FDR is alleged to have said about Somoza and other dictators in our region, "He may be son of a bitch, but he's *our* son of a bitch."

Like I said earlier, January 6, 2021 changed everything; it certainly changed this letter. You see, we Latin Americans spend a lot of time trying to convince folks from the USA that we are all Americans. We can even be a bit touchy about the subject. After the 6th, we realized that you are a Banana Republic, too! I imagine even you can now see that the SOBs your presidents sent South were just doing the same thing the American *HDPs* who stormed your Capitol were doing in January. It's clear to everyone now: we're all in the same boat. We are all subject to the same problems of democracy; the same plagues afflict our republics as yours.

As fellow banana republicans, we can all embrace what some try to use as a pejorative expression, a

put-down. Instead, we can claim our bananahood and see it clearly as a shared condition.

We can all listen to the advice of Benjamin Franklin who, when asked what kind of government was emerging after another civil war filled with foreign intervention he himself had arranged, is alleged to

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have said, “A Republic, ma’am, if you can keep it.”

I was asked to pen some words about what Latin America would want from a President Biden. What better place to start than with those words from our famed Franklin. I say “our” because down here we name schools and streets after him also.

- **A Republic, not an empire; that is what we ask of you, President Biden.**

We will struggle to keep ours. You can struggle to keep yours.

We are all fragile democrats; we are all banana republicans.

We, all of us Americans, are in the same struggle on the same continent; we share one land.

And, in the words of Woody Guthrie, sung so beautifully by Jennifer Lopez, “This land was made for you and me.”¹ Those words seem so fitting to so many of us, perhaps because they reflect the ethos of

1. Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land,” (written February 1940; 1951, Folkways Records), https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm.

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our indigenous cultures that still struggle to comprehend the private property systems that have been imposed on this continent that was theirs. As Guthrie pointed out, this is truly a beautiful land. He describes its breadth from west to east and back again. We would add it is beautiful from south to north and back again also.

*We are
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- **A beautiful, well-cared-for communal land; that is another thing we ask of you, President Biden.**

We share a continent; we share a world. When it gets hot up North, it gets hotter down South. Those powerful hurricanes that flood your cities swamp our towns, too. Our coastlines recede just as fast as yours. Our beaches and fish fill up with plastic junk just like yours. We all enjoy bananas, coffee, and corn (flakes or tortillas) for breakfast; but, if the climate changes too fast, no one's farmers can grow them. And when farmers can't farm, they migrate across these lands of ours.

Yes, *ours*. We aren't your backyard despite your doctrines. Backyards were for the slaves and servants. We pledge allegiance to a land where all are free, a land where no amount of bravery made that true. We share a land shaped by a complex history not by divine destiny. To paraphrase Woody, "This land was made by us and you." Slaves helped build the Capitol steps used on January 6 and January 20;

Salvadorans helped rebuild the Pentagon after 9/11. We share a complex geography and set of names.

The ironies so few can pronounce are endlessly fascinating. Guthrie sings of California and Gulf Stream waters. *Desde La California, pasando por Tejas, hasta La Florida* the lands were not yours. One nascent empire took them from fragile republics and fading empires. The homeland of Jennifer Lopez's parents was colonized by the authors of the Declaration of Independence. Woody's sparkling sands in the diamond deserts of *Arizona y New Mexico* were **México**. Spanish speakers named your snowy mountainous states and Red Rivers. President Jefferson bought Louisiana and the space for Woody to wander through golden valleys of corn from Napoleon, head of state of another republic-turned-empire.

- ***Diga sus nombres, say their names; that is another thing we demand of you, President Biden.***

We are not asking you to learn the correct Spanish pronunciation of many of your own states; it's too late for that. Now, together with your own citizens, we say Black and Brown lives matter. And they must be remembered. Amanda Gorman recited our pain also. We, too, wonder, how long will this darkness linger? We, too, lift our gaze and clamor, as in Scripture, for all we've had to witness and weather, for the rivers we have waded and the beasts we have braved.

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For our innocents die not just from the bullets of the blue but also the grenades of the green.

So, while we declaim Breonna Taylor's name, we remember **Rancho Dos Erres**, where in 1982 in the municipality of La Libertad, El Petén, Guatemala, over 200 people were thrown into their own wells, women raped in their own fields, and babies' heads bashed in with their fathers' hammers. I say the name Dos Erres because I lived near there, and soldiers from the same US-equipped Guatemalan base that committed the massacre searched me every day on my way to work.

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And, as we say Eric Garner's name, we call out in rage **Río Sumpul**, the border between Honduras and El Salvador, where US-trained soldiers from both countries machine-gunned more than 300 refugees struggling to breathe while crossing the river in 1980. I say the name Río Sumpul because I wept on its banks on the anniversary of those deaths.

As we say Freddie Gray, we cry **El Mozote**, Morazán, El Salvador, where in 1981 close to 1000 innocent people were massacred by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion of the Salvadoran army. I say the name El Mozote because I helped bury the bones of over 100 children unearthed from the ruins of the local church where they were downed by machine guns and grenades and then burnt.

As we remember George Floyd, we cry out for **Nicaragua**, where for more than eight and a half years

the US trained, equipped, and funded the Contras. Based in Honduras and Costa Rica, they knelt on our neighbor's neck. I say Nicaragua because I was there as a student in the 1980s and saw the dreams of a generation suffocate and die.

But, again with Amanda Gorman, we affirm that all is not Wounded Knee and the lynching tree, camps for the Japanese and deportation for the Chinese. We have accepted our fate; we have already taken account. We listen to our mothers, and, as you've mentioned that your own mother said, "There are some days when we need a hand. There are other days when we're called on to lend one."² We are ready to lend a helping hand, "to offer hope and laughter,"³ to build bridges and tear down walls.

*We are ready
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- **In humility accept our help; this is another thing we expect from you, President Biden.**

For like your father, we go to bed and worry all night about how to make ends meet. But in the morning before the light, we will rise from the foothills of Chirripó and Comalapa to grind our corn. We will rise from the shores of Soletiname and the villages of Chalate to make our art. We will rise up on our Atlantic coasts to harvest your bananas. We will

2. Joe Biden, "Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr." January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

3. Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," in *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country* (New York: Viking, 2021).

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rise from our volcano-rimmed lakes to cut your coffee. We will descend from the temples at Tikal and Copán to care for our common forests. And, if need be, we will wander with Woody the ribbons of highway beneath endless skyways. Like Amanda, “We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation.”⁴ For we know that, while the big high walls that try to stop us say “Private Property,” on the other side you say nothing. Nothing, as we harvest your corn rather than our own. Nothing, as we butcher your meat. Nothing, as we wash your dishes and change your diapers. Nothing, as our Dreamers inject your vaccines. Nothing, as our grandchildren reopen your Main Streets with their small businesses. Nothing, as our brightest write your newest novels and even legislate your laws. Whether you notice or not, whether you say something or not, our whole soul is in this whole beautiful continent of ours.

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- **Be brave enough to see it, President Biden; be brave enough for all of us to be it. Allow us to put our whole soul into lighting up this land of all of ours.**

Another Dutch-American immigrant to the Banana Republic of Costa Rica saw the light. Juan Stam put his whole soul into loving the Americas, in longing for the light. He even developed a theology of the

4. Ibid.

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banana. He observed and taught that the banana tree dedicates its whole life to giving fruit, like “Scripture tells us.”⁵ Once it has birthed its stalk of bananas, it dies while leaving “children” to grow up around it. He called for all us to imitate the banana and give ourselves in love of Lord, land, and neighbor.⁶

Bananas have a lot to teach us. So don’t worry too much if you need us to work in the North just like your companies come South to flood our markets. Just like us, they send their remittances home. And just like you dreamed of Delaware while in DC, we want to grow old at home with our bananas, children, and grandchildren, in this land of ours.

Sincerely,

Santiago Padilla DeBorst

Santa Rosa

Santo Domingo

Heredia

Costa Rica

Central America

5. Ibid.

6. Juan Stam, “La teología del banano,” *Blogs de Juan Stam*, January 8, 2007, <http://www.ticosnet.com/dnn/juanstam/Blogs/tabid/110/EntryID/108/Default.aspx>. Available in English, Juan Stam, “Banana Theology,” *Renuevo de Plenitud* (n.d.), <https://renuevo.com/en/teologia-del-banano.html>.