

DACOR's New Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) Luncheon Group Looks to the Future by Reflecting on the Past

By Lynn Northcutt Vega, Ambassador Frank Almaguer and Ambassador Luigi Einaudi

The Convening: In December 2023, a group of retired and active-duty foreign affairs professionals from the Department of State, USAID, other interagency partners, and the Organization for American States (OAS), came together to discuss the interest in establishing a group within DACOR, an organization of foreign affairs professionals, that would meet regularly over lunch at the DACOR Bacon House to discuss current events in Latin America and the Caribbean. Participants were excited to have an opportunity to socialize and share thoughts on the various crises and political challenges in the LAC region, both old and new.

On Its Way: The group's first luncheon meeting, held in January of this year, was on Guatemala's impending transfer of power. Congresswoman Norma Torres (D-CA) opened the discussion, followed by a panel that included two former ambassadors and the current USAID Mission Director. At least three other former ambassadors to Guatemala were in the audience. All the speakers and a couple of audience members subsequently were part of the U.S. delegation to the inauguration a week later. By showing that the world was watching, their presence helped defend against last-ditch maneuvers to prevent the installation of reformist President Bernardo Arevalo. Clearly, the group chose a timely topic for its first meeting!

A second meeting was held in February and focused on the region's migration crisis, its drivers, and how the U.S. can engage more effectively. Again, a top-notch interagency panel, including the Assistant Secretary for Border and Immigration Policy from the Department of Homeland Security, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, and other experts on the subject came together with an audience filled with over 40 participants. The discussion pinpointed the need for both fresh policies and increased resources. It was another big success.

The FLAG Group: Several members of this exciting new group see it as the reincarnation of the legendary Ford Latin America Group (FLAG), a private group which met at DACOR Bacon House for over three decades. FLAG came into existence in the 1980s, when the dramatic turmoil in Central America was followed by a remarkable tide of democratization and a hemisphere-wide shift from military to civilian rule. Ambassador Luigi Einaudi, a member of FLAG, said that FLAG's preeminent diplomats "sought to rekindle the idealism of the Alliance for Progress generation." They wanted to use their collective wisdom to shape thinking and policy for the region in real time. Early leaders of the group included Ambassadors Harry Schlaudeman, Peter Vaky, John Crimmins, and Robert Sayre.

In 1988, John Jova, a former U.S. ambassador to the OAS and multiple countries in the region, persuaded the group to name itself in honor of John W. Ford, a retired Foreign Service Officer. In

1951, Ford helped uncover a sophisticated Soviet listening device implanted in the beak of the eagle of the U.S. Great Seal in the ambassador's residence in Moscow. As a reward for this counterintelligence breakthrough, Mr. Ford was posted to the position in the Department of State that is today the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security. This was during the time that the late Senator Joseph McCarthy was raging his war against alleged communists in the U.S. Government.

As Senator McCarthy's investigations and accusations grew, Mr. Ford found himself under frequent subpoena by McCarthy, various congressional committees, and even a grand jury in New York. Exceptionally capable and unwaveringly principled, Ford In 1953 refused to give the McCarthy Committee access to the raw security files of some of the highest-ranking Foreign Service Officers in the Department. Ford was threatened with contempt of Congress and pressured by then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who demanded "positive loyalty" from employees throughout the Department, reflecting his willingness to coerce or remove personnel whose loyalties were questioned by Senator McCarthy and other politicians obsessed with the threat of communism.

Ford was eventually put on sick leave he had not requested then sent overseas. With time, he became director of Inter-American Political Affairs with the U.S. Permanent Mission to the Organization of American States, a position he held from 1967 to 1970. While in that position, he coordinated the U.S. military response under the OAS flag to stop the fighting during the 1969 "soccer war" between El Salvador and Honduras. For the next five years, he was Minister-Counselor of the Permanent Mission to the OAS. Mr. Ford left the State Department in 1975 and became an adviser to the Secretary General of the OAS. He returned to State as an adviser in 1984 and remained there until his premature death in 1988.

Eventually, Ambassador Bill Stedman took over leadership of FLAG after its original founders moved away or passed from the scene. Stedman was an unassuming gentleman who had served with distinction for more than three decades at the Department of State and USAID, eventually becoming U.S. ambassador to Bolivia. He convinced the exceptionally competent and reliable Carmen Sepassi of the Partners of the Americas to provide essential but uncompensated organizational and administrative support for more than 20 years. FLAG would not have survived without her. As Ambassador Stedman's health declined, various members, including John Keane, Stephen Chaplin, and Phil McLean stepped up to keep the group going, but eventually attendance began to drop. FLAG went out of existence in 2017. Many have since yearned for its return. Ambassador Lino Gutierrez expressed that sentiment like this, "Since the FLAG group ended, there has not been a much-needed forum to discuss important issues in the Western Hemisphere in this area. This new group will fill that void, and I am pleased to participate in its activities."

The Way Ahead: Having held two very successful meetings and with two more scheduled for April and May (on transnational crime and Venezuela), the new group is off to an excellent start. Its members have enthusiastically identified timely topics and speakers for upcoming sessions and invited new people from across the interagency to participate. They see the group as much more than an opportunity to have a nice lunch and stay in touch with old friends. Ambassador Bill Brownfield put his own spin on the two groups this way, “Back in the 1980s, when I was a youngster working the Central America account in the old Andean Regional Affairs Office, Executive Secretariat, and Office of the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, I attended a few lunches at DACOR Bacon House. It was pretty cool to be in a room listening to the senior practitioners of the time talk through various challenges and options. Now I am one of those grizzled old graybeards. I hope we are as cool and effective as the guys I remember from 40 years ago.” Today’s group knows that, if done right, their frank discussions about the goings-on in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as our own policies and problems, could have a very positive impact on the regional neighborhood.

The group is currently chaired on an interim basis by Ambassador Frank Almaguer. Ms. Lynn Vega serves as its Executive Secretary. Ambassador Almaguer, a distinguished member of the Senior Foreign Service and ambassador to Honduras, served in numerous positions with the Peace Corps, USAID, the Department of State, and the OAS. He currently serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Academy of American Diplomacy. Ms. Vega, a career Foreign Service Officer with USAID, spent over 20 years living and working throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. She is a member of DACOR’s Board of Governors and a Trustee of the DACOR Bacon House Foundation. She retired from USAID in December 2023. She is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and currently serves as its Representative in Washington, DC.

In addition to Ambassador Almaguer and Ms. Vega, Ambassador Luigi Einaudi participated in the development of this article by providing information on the history of FLAG and the people who sustained it. Ambassador Einaudi was a member of the original FLAG Group. He also was a long-time policy planner in the State Department. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the OAS and later as its elected Assistant Secretary General. Last fall he was honored by Ecuador and Peru on the 25th anniversary of the peace treaties ending the war between their countries.

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