

Meeting of State Legislators and Mayors of Portuguese Descent

(Opening remarks of Ambassador João de Vallera at the Embassy Residence, October 4th, 2009).

1. Let me start by some gestures of recognition. First of all, I would like to express both my satisfaction and my gratitude for your presence here, today, in the Residence of the Portuguese Embassy to the United States, and above all for your acceptance to participate in this meeting which we have decided to organize with the full encouragement of, and in cooperation with, the three members of the House of Representatives of Portuguese origin. Congressmen Jim Costa, Devin Nunes and Dennis Cardoza shuttle every week from California to the Capitol Hill but I am glad to say that they also know this address in Kalorama Road quite well. Let me also pay due tribute to those who have contributed financially to support this initiative, I mean FLAD, the Portuguese Ministry of Education through the Education Coordinator for the East Coast, Dr. Fernanda Costa, the Banif - and, for what has been a particularly generous donation, which includes tomorrow's dinner, the Espirito Santo Group. Let me also acknowledge the presence of two men that have given a consistent and continued support, many years from now, to the cause of the Portuguese-American relations : Dr. João Bosco Mota Amaral, representing on this occasion the Portuguese Parliament; and Dr. Rui Machete, President of FLAD. Allow me also a special welcome to my colleagues that ensure the Portuguese consular presence in San Francisco, Boston, Newark, New Bedford, Providence and Washington D.C, and to the Portuguese and Portuguese-American media, whose indispensable role I wish to stress and who joined us with an impressive delegation.

But I would like in particular to thank all the American elected personalities – with a special word of recognition for those who are here for the first time - who, from coast to coast, have massively welcomed or adhered to this initiative and even managed to be physically here on a proportion of over two thirds of their full capacity. This meeting is devoted to them all – and to the underlying reality that, in a more or less organized way,

with a higher or lower degree of collective awareness, the Portuguese American community plays a very important role in the development of the bilateral relations between Portugal and the United States; is an invaluable asset for the Portuguese presence and visibility in this country; and that, reciprocally, some form of identity recognition – in a country that so admirably combines the centripetal strength of integration with the celebration of ethnical diversity – enshrines a potential benefit for the advancement of the members of this community within the American society and throughout its various stages of political representation.

2. I hope that the program we have established is worthy of your interest and meets at least a significant part of your expectations. Actually, our intention has been, since the beginning, to go beyond a simple celebratory and protocol-minded event. I am not using these terms in a dismissive sense, since getting together and socializing are an important part of what I believe we all aim at here, but we wished to confer some additional substance to the meeting. That is why tomorrow we are going to be submitted, and invited to participate in, four working panels, covering varied areas of interest. That is also why we will be hosted – and this is obviously a must of the program – by the Congress of the United States and by the National Security Council. That is finally why we have decided to insert in this meeting, other than the diverse resident organizations that globally represent Portuguese and Portuguese-American interests – namely Palcus, NOPA or the Council of the Portuguese Communities (and I particularly welcome the presence amongst us of John Bento, Francisco Semião e João Luís Pacheco) – representatives of areas of activity that have a growing presence and a new and remarkable dynamic relevance in the intersection of the American and Portuguese spheres, like Centers of Portuguese Language and Culture in American Universities, like initiatives and organizations dealing with scientific research and technology and like concrete economic groups and enterprises, covering the double dimension of companies created and developed by Portuguese-Americans in this country and of Portuguese companies that invest and bring added value to the economy of the United States (inserting the USA in internationalization strategies that started around fifteen years ago

and that moved Portugal beyond the old paradigm of a country that was almost exclusively an exporter of people and an importer of capital).

3. So, what do we intend this meeting to be, and to bring us?

First, we expect it to provide an occasion for elected Americans of Portuguese descent to meet each other, to exchange addresses, to have a broader view of their own scattered reality in this immense country, while giving us a glimpse of their own experiences, visions and expectations.

Second, we think it offers the opportunity of a personal contact between them and the different political, institutional, diplomatic, cultural and economic agents that generously accepted to join us in this endeavor.

Third, we have the intention of using it to refresh our mutual awareness, and to transmit updated information about the present Portuguese reality (Portugal is not anymore, in many decisive aspects, the same country that was left by your ancestors) and about the state of the Portuguese- American relations, while benefiting, namely through our visit to the NSC, from relevant information about the State of the Nation.

Fourth, attention will be called to some issues that are of bigger concern to the Communities and that represent also a challenge to the Portuguese authorities (one of them-deportations - being particularly sensitive in the Azores).

Fifth, we would wish that this meeting, through your own successful experiences, could somehow contribute to raise in the American-Portuguese communities at large a more expanded and focused interest in participating in the American political life.

Sixth, that it might increase your curiosity and interest in Portugal, and in all things Portuguese.

Seventh, that this exercise might produce some food for thought usable by the organizations of the civil society that represent Portuguese interests and that intervene within the universe of the American-Portuguese relations.

Finally, that some extended appetite for networking or some consideration for a follow-up might be developed from here. We assume ourselves as mere facilitators, but we shall always be willing and available to contribute to the organization of, or to be present in, something – more focused, more ambitious, or reaching out to different subjects or targets as it might be – that identifies with these general purposes and objectives. I am conscious that I might be putting the bar too high before something which is basically experimental and that did not even take place. But even if only a few of the theoretical and tentative benchmarks I risked to advance are finally met, I consider this meeting to be widely valuable and worth while. I hope that at the end you might find the same.

4. Forgive me to ask some more minutes of your attention before we start our buffet, but I would like to announce the publishing of a book, under the FLAD auspices, that evokes the nineteenth century Azores through the eyes of an American family (an abridged version, in Portuguese, of the copious memoirs of the Dabney, which will soon be followed by an English version, is here at your disposal); and to ask Dr. Frank Sousa to guide us briefly through the collective testimony of successive generations of Portuguese established in this country, that finally found a permanent and dignified home in the Ferreira Mendes Portuguese-American Archives inaugurated two weeks ago at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. I couldn't find a better way to symbolically immerse in the spirit of this meeting than through these crossed visions over the Atlantic Ocean.

a) Vallera

