

World War I Symposium
Remarks by U.S. Chargé d’Affaires Margaret Diop
Chaguaramas Military History and Aerospace Museum
August 4, 2014 2pm

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen. All Protocol respectfully observed.

Good afternoon to you all.

It is a **real honor** to be back at the Chaguaramas Military History and Aerospace Museum.

It was almost a year ago when I first visited the museum and was impressed with the incredible work that has gone into preserving [**and sharing**] Trinidad and Tobago’s incredible heritage.

At the time, we signed a grant to create a website for the Museum so that its rich collection of artifacts and information can be shared with the world.

I must admit that I make **no special claim** to expertise in history. Especially not here, in the company of scholars like **Commander Kelshall** who literally *wrote the book* on the Caribbean and the Great War.

I would, **though**, like to briefly speak about how the First World War is remembered in the United States, how it changed America's role in the world, and how it still influences our policies today.

I know that over the next two days the symposium will cover in detail the **battles fought**, the **hellish conditions endured** by soldiers on both sides, and the **sacrifices made**.

If I may, I would like to use my time to focus on three lessons I think Americans choose to remember from the war.

The United States was a late entrant, only joining the allied cause in 1917, after the war had already raged for three years.

And we were certainly a reluctant entrant. Historically the U.S. shunned what George Washington called "*entangling alliances*" and avoided involvement with European disputes.

We finally entered the war in 1917 when German submarines increasingly targeted neutral vessels. At the same time the British intercepted and decoded the Zimmermann Telegram where the German government offered to aid Mexico in retaking territory from the United States.

With these provocations, neutrality gave way and on April 6, 1917 the United States Congress voted overwhelmingly to declare war.

This I think is **the first lesson** that Americans remember from the First World War: **That it is not enough to stand aside from the world's troubles.**

While the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans are wide, sooner or later the world's problems will reach us. It is a lesson we had to learn **again** on December 7, 1941 and **yet again** on September 11, 2001. I hope we never have to be reminded again.

As former Secretary of State Colin Powell said: **“We have gone forth from our shores repeatedly over the last hundred years ... and put wonderful young men and women at risk, many of whom have lost their lives, and we have asked for nothing except enough ground to bury them in...”**

This then is the **second lesson** I think Americans find in studying World War One: **That when we send our sons -- and these days our daughters as well -- to war, the United States must stand for something more than self-interest.**

So if we were not fighting for self-interest what were we fighting for? In 1918, while the war was still raging, President Wilson outlined his ideas for a more just and more peaceful world with his famous Fourteen Points speech.

Among other things he called for an adjustment of colonial claims and a “general association of nations” which would protect the independence and integrity of great and small states alike. A proposal that eventually became the League of Nations.

Unfortunately as we now know, few of these goals were realized after the First World War.

Partly, this is because President Wilson put forward his plan without consulting our allies and building the needed consensus.

Partly it is because America’s isolationist leanings returned and there was little desire among the American people to pursue these noble ends. **For example,** the United States, after proposing its creation, never entered the League of Nations.

Many of Wilson’s ideas were eventually realized, but only after the horrors of World War Two.

And there lies **the third lesson** many Americans see: **That it is not enough to articulate noble ideas, the United States must work with our friends and allies around the world to realize those values. And when we fail to do so, the alternative can be catastrophic.**

Which brings me back here, **to the Chaguaramas Military History and Aerospace Museum** housed on the site of a former U.S. military base.

The U.S. bases in the Caribbean were created in 1940, before the U.S. entered World War Two but when it was increasingly clear that the war was coming to our shores whether we wanted it or not.

There is a lot of history here. From this base and others like it, American sailors and airmen fought to protect the Caribbean from German submarines and to safeguard merchant ships.

American soldiers and marines trained for their missions in North Africa and the South Pacific.

Later, the base at Chaguaramas was part of our distant early warning system -- watching for Soviet missiles -- and was the site of the very first satellite transmission.

Although the bases closed more than fifty years ago, today the United States works with the people of Trinidad and Tobago in many areas, including combatting human trafficking and illegal narcotics and countering other transnational threats.

This level of international involvement is a far cry from the isolationist sentiments of a century ago, and it stems largely from the lessons of World War One and the vast changes in how America views its role in the world.

This can be seen today in the mission statement of the U.S. Department of State: to **“Create a more secure, democratic, and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people and the international community.”**

I go to work every morning with these lofty goals in mind and conscious of the fact that when nations fail to live up to these ideals the results can be apocalyptic.

No one really knows if the First or Second World Wars could have been prevented. But I think I speak for all of my colleagues here when I say we work every day to make sure there will never be another one.