

Testimony of Ronald Douglas Johnson
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of El Salvador
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
March 12, 2019

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished Members of the Committee.

I am truly honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the United States Ambassador to the Republic of El Salvador.

I am grateful to President Trump for the faith and confidence he's placed in me, and to Secretary Pompeo for his support. I am humbled by the opportunity to serve our country in this capacity at such an important time in our relationship with El Salvador and I am grateful to you for your consideration of my nomination.

I am supported in this endeavor by a strong and patriotic family. My wife, Alina, immigrated to this country over 50 years ago from Cuba. She has actively contributed to my service to this country for over 38 years, and it has not always been easy. My government careers have required frequent separations and service in high-risk areas. Together we've raised four grown children, Robert, Lori, Michael, and Joshua. Our youngest son Joshua is the fourth generation of our family to have served our country in combat.

I'd also like to mention my Mother-in-Law, Helen Arias. As an airline employee in Cuba, when communists took over the country she helped thousands of children flee to the United States aboard Pan-Am flights through a program called "Operation Pedro Pan." Today at 95 years young, she loves the United States as only someone who has lived under tyranny can.

I first represented the United States in El Salvador in 1984, when the country was embroiled in a horrible Civil War that would last for over twelve years, ravage the countryside, and claim the lives of over 70,000 people. Since that conflict ended in 1992, the Salvadoran people have exhibited a strong commitment to democracy through free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power. The most recent example of this is the February 3rd presidential election, where President-elect Nayib Bukele won a clear victory in a competitive multi-party race.

El Salvador has accomplished much since the war ended, but much work remains to be done.

For the United States, combating transnational crime and stemming illegal immigration are the key priorities. They are linked to slow economic growth and unemployment. There's clearly a need for increased security but we must also work together to simultaneously develop a broader economic agenda. El Salvador's growth rate of 2% per year over the last 10 years, is simply too low to provide economic opportunities and viable options for young Salvadorans. Working

together we need to focus on making El Salvador more attractive to business, instead of a place where businesses have to add the price of extortion to the costs of operating. We must work together to make illicit activities less lucrative and to produce dignified alternatives that help Salvadoran youth make the right choice.

The United States is El Salvador's number one trade partner and largest source of foreign investment. There are currently over three hundred U.S. businesses operating there but there could be more. If confirmed I will make the combined issues of security and prosperity my highest priorities.

I know our governments share the same concerns regarding illegal immigration and gang violence.

The government of El Salvador is working closely with us now to educate its citizens on the dangers associated with the long journey to the U.S. border and to discourage individuals from traveling to the United States without a visa.

There are multiple gangs in El Salvador where violence is the centerpiece of the gang's power, influence and reach.

In El Salvador gang membership is illegal and the government works with the Embassy's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement unit and other offices to disrupt and dismantle gangs and other transnational criminal organizations. These programs focus on strengthening the capacity of Salvadoran law enforcement and criminal justice systems through a three part approach: 1) Regional coordination and information sharing; 2) Bottom-up community anti-gang efforts designed to improve relationships between communities and the police; and 3) Top-down institutional reform to strengthen investigation and prosecution of criminal actors. If confirmed, one of my top priorities will be to expand these programs and to build stronger cooperation among regional partners and U.S. law enforcement. Gang violence is a multi-national problem and combating it will require multi-national cooperation.

El Salvador has made progress and there are indicators that should help us be optimistic.

El Salvador's "Plan El Salvador Seguro" has helped to reduce the murder rate by over 55 percent. And looking at the long term, World Bank statistics indicate that from 1990 to 2017 life expectancy increased from 64 to 74 years, while per capita income rose and extreme poverty dropped significantly.

We are on the right path but let there be no doubt, it is a path. Continued progress requires broad, sustained and persistent engagement and a willing partner. If we are respectful of each

other's concerns and limitations, we can work together toward a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship. I will treat people with dignity, honesty and respect. While I will be an effective negotiator, I will also be a good listener. I will prioritize our efforts in a way that is impactful and beneficial to both sides and I'll make those priorities clear to my staff and to our partners.

Chief of Mission San Salvador is no easy assignment but I believe my experience of over four decades of government service, along with my knowledge of the region and my deep respect for the Salvadoran people have prepared me well to represent America's interests and to advance this relationship. If confirmed I will safeguard our citizens, our embassy, and our reputation, and I will help build a more peaceful, secure, and prosperous relationship between the United States and the Republic of El Salvador. Your counsel and leadership would be crucial for this work and I look forward to working with you and your staffs in this endeavor.

It is an honor to be before you today and I would be pleased to answer any questions.