

Testimony of James B. Story
Nominee for United States Ambassador to Venezuela
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
August 6, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, I am greatly honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the United States Ambassador to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. I deeply appreciate the trust and confidence shown by the President and Secretary Pompeo in asking me to take on this important responsibility to represent the American people. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing to work with this Committee and Congress in advancing our goal of peaceful restoration of freedom, democracy, and stability in Venezuela. Achieving this objective is key to maintaining the Western Hemisphere as the "Hemisphere of Freedom" and vital to providing for the security of the United States. A hemisphere of free people, living in liberty, peace, and prosperity, engaging in mutually beneficial trade, working together to combat common problems such as transnational criminal organizations, is good for the Americas and good for the United States of America.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, as you and the Members of the Committee well know, our families are the keys to our successes in our professional and personal lives. The opportunity to appear before you today would not have been possible without the unconditional support of my wife, Susan, who has been my partner in diplomacy since she agreed to move our wedding date to accommodate the Department of State over 22 years ago. She and our son, Mac, have served the American people with distinction throughout these last 22 years – 17 for Mac – and I am eternally grateful to them.

I come before the Committee after serving nearly two years as the Chargé d'Affaires for Venezuela: first, at the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela, and then, following the March 2019 suspension of operations, of the newly established Venezuela Affairs Unit in Bogotá, Colombia. I have been blessed to work with an incredible team in Caracas, Bogotá, Washington, and throughout the interagency – a team that has worked tirelessly to advance American values abroad and to engender justice and freedom for Venezuelans who have long suffered under a brutal dictatorship. While, as a team, we have faced significant challenges, I would like to assure the Committee that your public servants in diplomacy remain staunchly committed to their responsibility of representing the United States.

U.S.-Venezuela Relations

The United States and Venezuela have a long history. We were one of the first countries to recognize the new republic in 1835, were among the first to help in developing its oil industry in 1914, and we have since developed a deep cultural affinity for shared pastimes, from baseball to barbecue. Venezuela is not only the birthplace of Simón Bolívar, but it has a long history of being a strong supporter of struggling democratic movements throughout Latin America, and a history of welcoming migrants and refugees from all over the Western Hemisphere and Europe. As a friend to the American people, the Venezuelan government gave us the statue of Simón Bolívar, *El Libertador*, that continues to stand proudly on Virginia Avenue, near the Organization of American States headquarters building in Washington, D.C.

Long the regional champion for liberation and democracy, Venezuela now faces its own fight for freedom from tyranny. Our commitment to the Venezuelan people and the democratic ideals upon which the Venezuelan Republic was founded is unwavering. This commitment is important, now more than ever, as the Venezuelan people and these ideals are in crisis.

Maduro's Man-Made Crisis

A failed economic ideology championed by Chávez during times of high oil prices led to its inevitable political descent to totalitarianism. Totalitarianism, masquerading as populism, with the active interference and participation by the Castro regime in Cuba and other malign actors, led to vast corruption and mismanagement that destroyed nearly every institution in the country. Before U.S. economic sanctions were introduced, Venezuela's ability to deliver basic services such as electricity, water, food, and medical care was already in free fall.

Today, more than 5 million Venezuelans have fled their country to others in the region, the largest forced displacement in the history of Latin America. In addition, another 7 million Venezuelans face malnutrition and are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance inside Venezuela. Today, the Coronavirus poses yet another dire threat to a country without the ability to provide even basic medical care. However, due to the herculean efforts of our colleagues in the U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, and other bureaus and agencies, we have been able to help Venezuelans across the hemisphere and within Venezuela deal in some measure with this man-made humanitarian disaster.

I want to thank Congress for its recognition of this crisis, its support through legislation and monetary assistance, and its continued commitment to the Venezuelan people. Because of this support, the United States is the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance for the Venezuela regional crisis. Over the last three years, the United States has provided more than \$856 million in both humanitarian and development assistance to support programs inside Venezuela and in 16 neighboring countries. This assistance works to support our democratic partners in the hemisphere who are directly affected by Venezuela's forced displacement.

Partners such as Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador have borne the brunt of caring for these refugees and other Venezuelans displaced abroad, but as good neighbors they have done so with generosity. Unfortunately, if left unchecked, the Venezuelan situation could prove destabilizing to the hemisphere: a dim prospect. In order to respond swiftly and effectively to life-threatening conditions, humanitarian organizations must be permitted full and unhindered access to reach all of the people in need in Venezuela. If confirmed, I will work with the international community and humanitarian assistance agencies of the United States to expand this reach to stabilize Venezuela.

I mentioned earlier that nearly all of Venezuela's institutions have been destroyed, yet throughout this entire struggle, a singular governmental structure has remained resolute in its support for democratic ideals, the National Assembly of Venezuela. Despite regime intimidation, the illegal and unconstitutional arrest of several of its members, and the forced exiles and attacks against their family members and friends, the National Assembly continues to work to restore a fully democratic and representative government. These efforts have been led

by the President of the National Assembly and Interim President of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó. Recognized by nearly 60 countries as the legitimate leader of Venezuela, Interim President Guaidó continues to work with the National Assembly, the only remaining democratic institution in Venezuela, to represent the hopes and aspirations of all Venezuelans against the illegitimate Maduro regime. I salute the bravery of Interim President Guaidó and the members of the National Assembly. Together with all those who are fighting for change – journalists, NGOs, human rights defenders, teachers, nurses, students – these democratic actors count on our support and that of the broader international community to tell their story.

Framework for Change

In order to make true and lasting positive change in Venezuela, the country and government must be returned to the Venezuelan people – and the people must be allowed to participate in free and fair presidential elections. Earlier this year, the United States proposed a pathway to resolving Venezuela’s political crisis that is rooted in a peaceful, democratic, negotiated transition.

This framework reflects the efforts of dozens of countries and regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States, Lima Group, and European Union in seeking a peaceful political resolution to the Venezuela crisis. It builds on the Oslo Process negotiations. Together, we have called, and continue to call, on all who are truly interested in the welfare of the Venezuelan people to support this framework as a peaceful path toward a better future. I believe this framework protects the interests and equities of all Venezuelans who desperately seek a resolution to this dire crisis. We will continue to work with our partners to increase support for this framework and to intensify international pressure against the illegitimate Maduro regime to ensure that it, too, sees this framework as the best option out of this crisis. Free and fair presidential elections, convoked by a transitional government that represents all political equities, offer the best pathway towards a peaceful transition.

While Maduro and his allies have denounced sanctions as blocking aid from people in need, that is far from reality. Our Venezuela sanctions program maintains broad exemptions and authorizations that allow for the provision of humanitarian assistance, and we are vigilant in working to prevent overcompliance issues and addressing any concerns that sanctions are preventing humanitarian goods or services from entering Venezuela. The sanctions are doing what they are designed to do: block Maduro and his allies from profiting off of their ill-gotten gains. Additionally, the U.S. government has been clear that these sanctions policies are intended to change behavior and that we will consider lifting sanctions if there are concrete meaningful actions to combat corruption in Venezuela, end human rights abuses, and restore democratic order. The democratic transition framework explicitly lays this out. Yet Maduro has refused to address the original sin of the fraudulent May 2018 presidential elections and consider a path towards reestablishing democratic governance, instead choosing to tighten his perceived grip on power by any means. Until he relents and there can be truly free and fair presidential elections, Maduro’s regime will continue the policies of oppression, human rights abuses, corruption, ineptitude, and mismanagement. A peaceful, political, democratic, and constitutional transition in Venezuela is in the interests of all Venezuelans, its neighbors, and the United States. If confirmed, I will work tirelessly with my team to ensure this transition is successful.

Following the institution of the transitional government and administration of free and fair presidential elections, the follow-on goal of U.S. policy is clear: to help Venezuelans return democracy and the rule of law to their country, and then bring mutual prosperity to our two nations. Recovery can only begin when the government respects the rights of all Venezuelans, regardless of political party, economic status, or connections. When these conditions are met, Venezuela's talented population can retake its future and the millions of Venezuelans previously forced to flee their country will be able to return to their homeland – a land in need of healing, and open to opportunities and growth, refocused on its most important resources, its citizens.

If confirmed, I look forward to once again raising the American flag above our embassy in Caracas. In returning our full diplomatic presence to the country, it is my intent, in representing the American people, to promote democracy and the rule of law, to build respect for human rights, to facilitate U.S. support to the Venezuelan people through development and humanitarian assistance, and to assist Venezuela in its return to economic stability. I pledge to continue to work diligently with our Venezuelan and international partners to uphold the democratic principles we hold dear in the United States and to proudly represent the American people. In supporting a new, truly representative government in Venezuela to reopen its economy to the world market, U.S. companies will be able to reestablish their presence and be partners in building value for both countries. The scars left by the Chávez and Maduro periods will not heal quickly, but they can and will heal. And in the end, a truly free Venezuela, returned to its democratic traditions, as first espoused by Bolívar, can again be a stabilizing force in the region and a close friend and partner of the United States of America.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you. I welcome any questions you may have.