

Statement by Larry Palmer
Ambassador-Designate to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
July 27, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I am honored to be President Obama's nominee to serve as the next U.S. Ambassador to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. I am deeply grateful to the President and to Secretary Clinton for their confidence in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this committee and the rest of the Congress to advance our interests in Venezuela and the region.

I fully understand and appreciate the importance of the position for which I am being considered and believe it is one for which my experience has prepared me well. For the past five years, I have served as the President and CEO of the Inter-American Foundation, and traveled extensively throughout the region to promote the Foundation's goals of inclusive development, to forge bonds of friendship and understanding between the peoples of the hemisphere, and to promote democratic principles. I have also represented my country as Ambassador to Honduras and as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires in Quito, Ecuador. I have also served in the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

Our relationship with Venezuela is longstanding and deep, encompassing everything from commerce and culture to education and sports. Our histories have been intertwined since our wars of independence. Today, despite our differences, our economies, cultures, and people are closely linked. U.S.-Venezuelan commercial ties are particularly strong. The United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner, with U.S. goods accounting for about 25% of

Venezuela's imports. Venezuela is the United States' third-largest export market in Latin America, purchasing U.S. machinery, transportation equipment, agricultural commodities, and auto parts. Venezuela is also one of the top four suppliers of foreign oil to the United States, supplying about a million barrels a day, equivalent to about 5 percent of daily consumption.

Despite our shared history and the longstanding ties that connect us, our bilateral relationship today has become increasingly strained. In September 2008, the Venezuelan government expelled Ambassador Patrick Duddy. Upon his return last July, we hoped to rebuild more cooperative relations. However, repeated attempts to engage the Venezuelan government on issues of mutual interest thus far have been largely unsuccessful. We regret that. Despite these setbacks, if confirmed, I will be committed to working both bilaterally towards a relationship based on the mutual interests of democratic peace, prosperity, and security. While we may not agree on some issues, there is room for improved cooperation on areas of common ground.

More specifically, should I be confirmed, I will focus on several objectives and principles:

My main priority will be the safety of the approximately 18,000 American citizens residing in Venezuela and the thousands of American tourists who travel there. Venezuela unfortunately is a country with a high crime rate, and our Embassy attends to the needs of American citizens who may be affected by that reality.

I am committed to safeguarding American economic interests and investments in Venezuela. If confirmed, I will be an advocate for U.S. business and commercial interests in Venezuela, and will work with the Venezuelan government to fulfill its obligations to provide prompt, adequate and effective compensation for any expropriations in accordance with international law.

If confirmed, a key component of my work will include support for democracy, human rights, and fundamental democratic freedoms. These core values define the United States as a nation, and they are enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter and in the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, which the U.S. supports both in Venezuela and throughout the hemisphere. If confirmed, I intend to make this pillar of our foreign policy an important focus of my tenure.

I believe it is important for our countries to find common ground on which to cooperate, and I will focus my energies on engaging the Venezuelan government on areas of mutual interest including counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, commerce, and energy. Part of our engagement will include continued support for educational, cultural, sports and people to people exchanges, to build mutual understanding and strengthen our longstanding relationship.

In closing, I would like to emphasize my sincere hope that Venezuela will be willing to explore improved relations with the United States. Polls show that the Venezuelan people desire a better relationship with the United States. We share that common interest. Thus, despite the many challenges, of which I am clear-eyed and aware, we remain committed to a positive relationship with the people of Venezuela, and we have the patience, perseverance, and persistence necessary to get there.

If confirmed, I pledge to work closely with members of this Committee, and with your colleagues in Congress, to advance these objectives in Venezuela.

Thank you again for giving me the honor of appearing before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.