

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#1)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

In response to a February 2010 report issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) regarding violations of human rights and intimidation of citizens in Venezuela based on their political beliefs, I released a joint statement with Senator Dodd in March 2010. You will find an excerpt of this statement below:

*“We are deeply disturbed by some of the report’s observations. One of the more alarming findings was that: ‘The Commission considers that the lack of independence and autonomy of the judiciary with respect to the political branches constitutes one of the weakest points of democracy in Venezuela, a situation that seriously hinders the free exercise of human rights in Venezuela. In the Commission’s judgment, it is this lack of independence that has allowed the use of the State’s punitive power in Venezuela to criminalize human rights defenders, judicialize peaceful social protest, and persecute political dissidents through the criminal system.’”*

We mentioned in our joint statement that *“this passage highlights what can happen in a country when the regional and international mechanisms that are in place to prevent this type of erosion of democratic institutions fail to act.”* Please provide your views of the performance of the Organization of American States (OAS) in safeguarding human rights in Venezuela. If confirmed, how will you work with U.S. Permanent Representative to the OAS, Carmen Lomellin, to ensure that the OAS is responsive to these repetitive and blatant violations?

A worsening of the situation in Venezuela should be of concern to all the Member States of the OAS as it is a clear violation of Venezuela’s obligations under the American Convention on Human Rights and the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Many believe that the United States should invoke the Democratic Charter. Under what circumstances would the U.S. seek to invoke the OAS's Democratic Charter?

**Answer:**

The Inter-American Democratic Charter stands as a powerful standard by which governments, including Venezuela, should be held accountable by their citizens and the international community. Compliance with the principles and values enshrined in the

Democratic Charter is a critical element for participation in the Inter-American system. However, the Democratic Charter is not a legally binding instrument. Unfortunately, there are no sanction or enforcement mechanisms included in its text. Except for the possibility of suspension if a member state experiences an unconstitutional interruption of its democratic order, the Charter contains limited mechanisms for encouraging compliance, beyond diplomatic initiatives.

With this in mind, I believe that more needs to be done to make the Democratic Charter a more effective instrument for the promotion and defense of democracy, including in Venezuela. Increased political will from OAS member states, including Venezuela, to honor commitments under the Democratic Charter is required for full compliance with the Charter's democratic norms.

I believe it is imperative that the OAS move forward to implement mandates emanating from the 2005-2010 General Assemblies and Summit of the Americas processes that would serve to bolster regional cooperation to support democracy and human rights. At the same time, the authority of the OAS Secretary General to bring matters of hemispheric concern to the attention of the Permanent Council should also be fully exercised with regard to regional democracy and human rights concerns. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the U.S. Permanent Mission to the OAS to help advance these efforts.

Since the 2005 Fort Lauderdale General Assembly, the United States has been working with hemispheric partners to make the Inter-American Democratic Charter a more effective tool in the promotion and defense of democracy. These efforts include

our strong support of initiatives to open the political bodies of the Organization to greater participation by civil society groups concerned with democracy and human rights in the Americas, including in Venezuela. As called for in the recent OAS General Assembly in Lima, the United States is working with like-minded member states and civil society to advance a dialogue at the OAS on the effectiveness of the Charter's use and implementation, in anticipation of its tenth anniversary in September 2011. As part of this process, the U.S. Mission to the OAS plans to review a variety of options to support Charter strengthening, which I hope to be able to support if confirmed.

Apart from the Inter-American Democratic Charter, other OAS mechanisms – such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the follow-up mechanism to the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption (known as MESICIC), as well as OAS election observation missions (EOMs) – serve as important and useful barometers to gauge the state of democracy in our region. The IACHR, as a highly-respected organ of the Inter-American human rights system, plays a critical role in monitoring human rights situations throughout the Americas. As such, the United States is a strong and vocal supporter of the Commission, placing vital importance upon the preservation of the IACHR's autonomy and independence. We agree that the Commission's thorough report on Venezuela noted serious concerns. In reaction to this report and the IACHR's Annual Report, the United States supported OAS Secretary General Insulza's call for the Venezuelan government to allow the IACHR and the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression to visit Venezuela. I think that a respectful dialogue between

the IACHR and the Venezuelan government would allow for greater opportunities for engagement between the government of Venezuela and members of civil society.

Only time and the course of events in Venezuela will determine whether other OAS member states decide to honor their commitments under the Charter and stand up in defense of democracy in Venezuela, or wherever it is threatened.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#2)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

What is the State Department's position on the cases below? What is the Department doing to bring attention to these issues?

- In December 2009, President Hugo Chávez ordered the arrest of Judge María Lourdes Afiuni after she ordered the release (pending trial) of a banker who had been incarcerated without trial a year longer than Venezuelan law allows. Venezuelan authorities have kept Judge Afiuni in pre-trial detention with the general inmate population, including several inmates that she condemned for serious crimes, and in extreme danger to her life. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and several multilateral and nongovernmental human rights organizations have expressed concern about her arrest.
- In February 2010, the IACHR released a scathing report on the human rights situation in Venezuela. The report cited several ongoing violations of human rights by the Government of Venezuela on its own people, and it urged the Venezuela to allow a visit by the Commission. President Chávez has refused such a visit.
- On March 22, Venezuelan authorities imprisoned a former state governor, presidential candidate, and congressman, Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, for speaking on television about Venezuela's growing role in international drug trafficking networks.
- On June 11, Venezuelan authorities renewed their judicial harassment of Guillermo Zuloaga, president and principal shareholder of Globovisión, and Nelson Mezerhane, a minor shareholder and director of Globovisión – the sole remaining independent TV station in Venezuela. As a result, the IACHR and the IACHR Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression have urged the Venezuelan Government not to silence critical opinions.

**Answer:**

I share your deep concerns about limitations on freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Venezuela and if confirmed, will continue to raise them with the Government of Venezuela. The Department has expressed these concerns both publicly and privately on numerous occasions in Caracas and Washington. The Secretary of State, the Department spokesman, and the U.S. Representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) have spoken forcefully against this and will continue to do so.

Specifically, the Department's spokesman expressed serious concern over the detention of former governor Oswaldo Alvarez Paz and arrest of former Globovision director Guillermo Zuloaga and pending charges against Zuloaga and his son. He urged the Venezuelan government to honor its commitments under the Inter-American Democratic Charter and supported the work of the independent and autonomous Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Venezuela (IACHR). The Department is also carefully monitoring developments regarding the arrest and incarceration of Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni.

In her remarks before the OAS Permanent Council on January 27, 2010, U.S. Ambassador to the OAS Carmen Lomellin voiced concern over the closure of Radio Caracas Television and other media outlets and condemned restrictions on freedom of expression. She called on OAS member states to support and encourage freedom of expression as part of their commitments under the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international instruments. Also, in reaction to a Venezuelan

attempt at the recent OAS General Assembly in Lima to restrict legitimate civil society participation in OAS activities, the United States worked assiduously with like-minded OAS member states to reject the Venezuelan proposal and uphold the OAS' commitment to civil society engagement. The Venezuelan proposal would have granted Venezuela, as well as other member states, the ability to veto the participation of numerous NGOs at OAS proceedings.

The Department supports OAS Secretary General Miguel Insulza's call for the Venezuelan government to allow the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the IAHCR's Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression to visit Venezuela. I hope the Venezuelan government eventually comes to see this report as an opportunity to engage with civil society to address these concerns.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#3)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

Many critics of President Chávez have gone into exile to avoid jail time. The effort to silence critics comes at a time when the opposition is preparing for National Assembly elections in September. Please explain your views regarding the credibility of these elections given the political persecution of dissenters in Venezuela. Please comment on the objective conditions for this election in light of the highly critical election observation reports by the OAS and the EU on the 2005 legislative elections.

**Answer:**

Despite concerns about recent changes in the electoral law and voting districts that clearly favor the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), opposition political parties have said their participation in the September 26 legislative elections is crucial to their regaining a role in national politics and national government. They have spent the past year organizing and preparing for this election. Following a process of negotiation and primary elections, opposition political parties, working through a "Unity Table," agreed on a single slate of opposition candidates. While a few political figures have left the country, the 165 candidates selected remain in-country and are inscribed with the National Electoral Council (CNE). The opposition is currently organizing to mobilize voters and to train election-day witnesses. Opposition leaders expect to win enough seats to have a real voice in the next National Assembly. Many leaders have expressed regret at the opposition's decision to withdraw from the 2005 legislative race,



which effectively ceded control of one branch of government to President Chavez and the PSUV.

While the independent rector of the National Electoral Council has expressed a high level of confidence that votes can be safely cast and fairly counted on election day, he has consistently expressed concern about the unfair electoral playing field, especially the government's unlimited access to the media.

We remain concerned by the government's refusal to permit independent international electoral observation missions (EOMs) to observe the September 26 elections consistent with the terms of the Declaration of Principles for International Electoral Observation. EOMs from the European Union and the OAS observed the 2008 municipal and gubernatorial elections, which they deemed generally free and fair with some irregularities. In those elections, opposition candidates won five governorships and 63 mayoralties.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#4)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the September 2010 elections, but little or no time has been spent analyzing the issue of current and future governability after the elections. Please outline your top areas of concern regarding post-election Venezuela.

**Answer:**

Secretary Clinton has repeatedly emphasized that elections are one marker of democracy, but not the only one. While I hope the legislative elections on September 26 will allow the Venezuelan people to freely and fairly elect their National Assembly Deputies, if confirmed, I will continue to monitor closely other aspects of Venezuela's democracy that are currently threatened, including freedom of expression and of the press, the right to own private property, and freedom of association for civil society.

In addition to these threats to human rights and fundamental freedoms, I am also concerned by the increasing centralization of power in the executive branch. President Chavez has explicitly rejected the principle of separation of powers and has exerted increasing control over the judicial and legislative branches of government. Under his direction, the National Assembly has enacted a series of laws that create parallel institutions to circumvent elected local and state authorities.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#5)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

Please provide your assessment of the Venezuela's military in light of President Hugo Chávez's orders to break off diplomatic relations with Colombia. A recent GAO report that I commissioned states that at least one branch of the military, the National Guard, is deeply involved in the narcotics business. Please comment on the fact that two out of three individuals designated as "kingpin" under OFAC procedures remain entrenched in high-level positions in the Venezuelan security apparatus. It is particularly troublesome to hear that one of them, General Henry Rangel Silva, has recently been promoted to the most important operational post within the National Bolivarian Armed Forces.

**Answer:**

I am keenly aware of the clear ties between members of the Venezuelan government and Colombian guerillas. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) maintain camps in Venezuela, and members of the FARC high command have occasionally appeared in public in Caracas. The Venezuelan government has been unwilling to prevent Colombian guerillas from entering and establishing camps in Venezuelan territory. Moreover, FARC hard drives obtained by the Colombian government in a March 2008 raid in Ecuador provided damaging information on the nature and extent of the longstanding relationship between the FARC and members of the Venezuelan government.

I am concerned that two individuals designated under OFAC are high ranking officials of the Venezuelan government. It is particularly troublesome that General Henry Rangel Silva was appointed Strategic Operational Commander of Venezuelan

Armed Forces. If confirmed, I will continue to insist that the Venezuelan government uphold its obligations as a member of the OAS to prevent the use of its territory by all members of foreign terrorist organizations. . We would also remain prepared to act on other designations should the circumstances warrant such measures.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#6)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

As a result of President Chávez breaking off ties with Colombia, numerous reports point to divisions within the Venezuelan military. Some analysts confirm that support for Mr. Chávez is less than previously expected but that internal infighting, even among pro-government elements, and operational decay are probably greater than anticipated. Please give us your assessment of the current state of the Venezuelan armed forces and the risk a crisis at its core could present for peace and democracy in Venezuela.

**Answer:**

Venezuela has not fought a foreign war since its independence. Despite extensive financing, professionalism in the Venezuelan Army has decreased due to the retirement of large numbers of officers and a President Hugo Chavez move allowing non-commissioned officers to transition directly into the commissioned corps. New officer training has been cut from five to four years. Most significantly, there has been a noted preference for political loyalty over professional talent. Morale is reported to be considerably low, particularly due to politically-oriented appointments. Both the Army and the Air Force have suffered equipment maintenance problems, with potentially serious consequences for capability and readiness. In spite of morale and equipment problems, however, the primacy of political loyalty appears unchallenged.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#7)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

How would you describe Venezuelan-Cuban military-to-military interaction over the years? How would you describe it today? Could you discuss the level of involvement of the Cuban Government in the internal affairs of Venezuela? Please explain the implications of this relationship for U.S. interests.

**Answer:**

Cuba is the only non-democratic country in the hemisphere. Venezuela is struggling with poverty, corruption, crime and other destabilizing elements that further threaten Venezuela's precarious democratic institutions. As Cuba and Venezuela increase their military-to-military ties, I am concerned that Cuba's influence within the Venezuelan military will grow.

Publicly available information estimates thousands of Cuban medical personnel, coaches, and advisors (including military and intelligence) work in Venezuela. While the Venezuelan government states that the Cuban presence in Venezuela is limited to the medical, educational, and technical spheres, there are credible reports of growing Cuban-Venezuelan cooperation in the fields of intelligence services and the military. Venezuelan military officers train in Cuba. Venezuelan "social promoters" receive paramilitary training from Cuban officers in Venezuela. On February 2010, a senior Cuban security official and former interior minister, General Ramiro Valdez, arrived in Caracas to reportedly help resolve Venezuela's energy crisis. At the end of July, Cuba

and Venezuela officials signed 139 agreements related to collaborative projects in the areas of food security, mining, health and energy.

Our interests in the region are to promote and advance democratic governance and values. Replicating the institutions of the Hemisphere's only dictatorship will further undermine the existence of Venezuela's remaining democratic institutions – non-governmental organizations, universities, the private sector, and political parties. We must respond with cleared-eyed analysis of these developments and increase our efforts to support civic leaders, human rights activists, journalists and others who are working toward positive change in Venezuela.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#8)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

A great deal has been said in public and in private about President Chávez's meddling in the affairs of Colombia; most recently Colombian Government officials stated that Venezuela is harboring as many as 87 guerilla camps used to smuggle cocaine and launch terrorist attacks across the border. Please provide your views regarding the implications that this meddling has on the effectiveness of gains made through Plan Colombia, for drug interdiction and for efforts to help the Colombian Government bring peace to Colombia.

**Answer:**

The allegations presented by the Colombian government to the OAS regarding the presence of FARC camps in Venezuelan territory are very serious, and Venezuela has an obligation to fully investigate this information. All countries in the Americas, through various international fora, have committed to reject the presence of illegal armed groups in their territory. It is the expectation of all members of the inter-American community that all OAS member states fulfill that commitment. Venezuela is obliged as a member of the United Nations and the Organization of American States to deny terrorist groups the ability to operate within its territory.

Plan Colombia has been instrumental in enhancing security in Colombia and more effectively addressing the illicit drug trade. Part of this success is due to the military successes achieved against terrorist organizations such as the FARC. Effective border control and cooperation between the Colombian and Venezuelan security forces



are critical to containing these terrorist forces. Our concerns and those of other international observers have been heightened by the Venezuelan armed forces' apparent unwillingness or inability to cooperate in controlling the border. On July 22, the Venezuelan government broke diplomatic relations with Colombia in response to these accusations. It is the position of the State Department that breaking diplomatic ties and ceasing communication is not a constructive way to achieve greater border security.

More recently, the Venezuelan government reported capturing six paramilitary fighters from Colombia within its territory. While this is a positive development, the Venezuelan government must cooperate with the Colombian government to prevent the use of its territory by all members of foreign terrorist organizations. If confirmed as Ambassador, I will continue to insist that the Venezuelan government uphold its obligations as a member of the Organization of American States, to promote peaceful dialogue between Venezuela and Colombia, and to promote an agenda that will protect the security gains that have been made in the region.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#9)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez recently threatened to cut oil supplies to the United States in case of a military attack from Colombia as a dispute escalated over charges his country harbors Colombian rebels. Given that Venezuela, a member of OPEC, gets more than 90 percent of its export income from oil sales, mostly to the United States, and that the South American country's economy would collapse quickly if it stopped shipments, could you provide your views regarding President Chávez's repeated and bombastic threats to the United States.

**Answer:**

President Chavez has made repeated threats to stop oil shipments to the United States since as far back as May 2003. The impact on Venezuela's economy would be serious. Exports of crude oil and refined products to the United States accounted for more than half of the total exports of Venezuela's state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), in 2009. This may actually understate the importance of the U.S. market to PDVSA, however, because the company offers preferential oil financing deals to other clients such as the members of the PetroCaribe program which may limit the cash it receives from these other markets. Since oil exports accounted for about 95 percent of Venezuela's total foreign currency earnings in 2009, a 50 percent or more reduction could make it very difficult for the Venezuelan government to sustain critical imports.

The United States has a mutually beneficial energy relationship with Venezuela that we expect to see continue.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#10)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

In the first quarter of 2010, Venezuela's economy *contracted* by 5.8 percent. Earthquake-ravaged Haiti is the only other country in the Western hemisphere to see its economy shrink so far this year. Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) produced 3.3 million barrels of oil per day (bpd) in 2001. But a massive strike in 2002, the firing of thousands of PDVSA employees that followed, and mismanagement have taken a toll. The Government claims that it still produces 3 million bpd. Some experts claim the number is closer to 2.6 million. OPEC says Venezuela is now producing closer to 2.3 million. In June, inflation hit 31.2 percent year on year. Venezuela imports nearly three-quarters of its food, but shortages of basic foodstuffs in state-run grocery stores have eroded Chávez's popularity. A scandal erupted this spring when officials discovered tens of thousands of tons of imported food that had been abandoned to rot in state-run warehouses. Please explain the implications for the region of an implosion of Venezuela's economy. Please provide your views on the funding and trading implications for countries within the so-called ALBA group.

**Answer:**

Most observers do not believe that Venezuela will suffer the kind of economic crisis that has been associated with other emerging market crises in the Hemisphere, i.e., a balance of payments crisis followed by currency devaluation or debt default. Following the sharp decline in oil prices in 2008, Venezuela's oil revenues rebounded in 2009. Its average oil price so far in 2010 has been approximately \$70 a barrel which would yield some \$46 billion in revenues for the year assuming oil exports of approximately 1.8 million barrels per day. In addition, the new foreign exchange system imposed by the Venezuelan government in June has strengthened its ability to avoid an "implosion" by giving it a mechanism to carefully monitor and maintain its foreign exchange reserves. Instead, while Venezuela would inevitably be importing

less, it appears that any crisis would largely be a domestic one in which productive industries would not be able to get enough foreign currency to maintain production with resulting shortages of popular consumer goods and unemployment. Food supplies might be a particular concern given declining domestic production but we believe that the government will be careful to maintain stocks of basic foodstuffs.

Although trade with ALBA and Cuba specifically is not critical to Venezuela, it is critical to Cuba which gets discounted oil and sells many services to Venezuela. Additionally, Petrocaribe petroleum exports are important to many economies throughout the Caribbean region. As Venezuela's domestic economic problems mount, pressure could build to either scale back or end subsidized exports. This could have detrimental effects on the economies of these smaller, petroleum import dependent nations. The Venezuelan government is making every effort to maintain these links for political reasons.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#11)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

In order to properly assess the imminence of economic and political turmoil it is key to understand the financial situation of the Venezuelan Government. Please provide your assessment of the true level of reserves held at the Central Bank of Venezuela. Different estimates have reached my attention that would indicate that a correct evaluation of existing reserves differs from the official numbers due to improper accounting of arrears related to expropriations, delayed payments, and possible legal rulings against the Government of Venezuela. Please provide information regarding the quality of assets held by the bank in light of a decision announced a few years ago to move monetary reserves away from the U.S. dollar and U.S. institutions, and the possible purchase of debt from financially risky political allies in the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua).

**Answer:**

Venezuelan Central Bank (BCV) reserve numbers are still generally believed to be accurate. The Bank currently indicates that it has approximately \$29 billion in reserves; \$15 billion in gold, \$10 billion in currency, and \$4 billion in IMF Special Drawing Rights. This is distinct from December 2008 when the Bank had foreign reserves of \$41 billion, of which \$32 billion was in currency. The Bank's foreign reserves have been declining and the liquid portion shrinking as the government has moved reserves out of the Central Bank into other government funds such as its National Development Fund (Fondo de Desarrollo Nacional or FONDEN), which are not transparent. Thus, the true levels of "reserves" of the Venezuelan government are difficult to calculate.

While the Central Bank did make a decision to move out of U.S. dollars and U.S. banking institutions, the Department believes that it moved into holding Euros and assets at the Bank for International Settlements. The Department does not believe the Bank has purchased debt from countries that would be considered to be more financially risky for the past two to three years.

Venezuela currently faces a number of international arbitration claims filed by U.S. and other international claimants. It appears that the government has also paid only a fraction of potential domestic claimants. The Department believes that the totality of these claims would exceed Venezuela's reserves.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador - Designate Larry Leon Palmer by  
Senator Richard G. Lugar (#12)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 27, 2010**

**Question:**

Given the difficulty our two previous Ambassadors have had in accessing Venezuelan officials on a timely and constructive basis. And given the unjustified expulsion of one of our Ambassadors, please provide your views on maintaining relations at the Ambassadorial level with Venezuela. Alternatively, should U.S. representation be downgraded to a level commensurate with the attention and respect we have been granted?

**Answer:**

As a regional neighbor and an important commercial partner, the United States remains committed to seeking a dialogue with the Venezuelan government on a range of issues of mutual interest. These issues — of regional security, counternarcotics, and energy cooperation – are too important for both countries to simply give up. We remain open to a substantive dialogue. The withdrawal of ambassadorial-level representation would send the opposite message and potentially increase distrust, miscommunication, and tensions between our two countries.

As I indicated in my opening statement, the United States also has a long-standing relationship with the Venezuelan people, tens of thousands of whom regularly visit the United States each year to study, visit family, for business, or for tourism. We welcome these people-to-people connections, which promote common understanding and mutual cultural appreciation. We also have thousands of Americans living in Venezuelan, billions of dollars of investments and billions of dollars of exports. The

unilateral withdrawal of ambassadorial-level relations would be a sign of weakness that would jeopardize our interests and disappoint our friends in Venezuela.

A U.S. Ambassador is appointed by the President as the U.S. representative in another country, and in that capacity serves as a symbol of our country's commitment to protecting and promoting democracy and human rights. Any effort to downgrade our representation in Venezuela at this time could be seen as a weakening of our commitment to the defense of those values and as a signal that we are turning back on the Venezuelan people at this difficult time in their history. It is precisely because of these difficult challenges in the bilateral relationship that we especially need to be represented at the ambassadorial level.

Finally, if confirmed, I plan to embrace a holistic approach. I believe that people-to-people contacts are important, and we have the opportunity to engage the people of Venezuela in areas of common interest, including commerce, culture, democracy, education, and human rights. I will promote programs that foster understanding between the peoples of our two countries, as I believe cooperation and understanding among peoples will eventually lead to cooperation and understanding among governments. By engaging all sectors of the country I hope to strengthen our common ties and promote dialogue on our common interests.