

Chief of Mission

Todd Robinson's

Remarks for "Limitless Encounters"

Thursday, May 17, 2018 at 10:00 a.m.

Good morning! I am very pleased to be here today at UCAB. For those of you whom I have not met yet, I'd like to begin by telling you a bit about myself before we move onto the topic of the day. Like you, I went to a great Jesuit school to get my degree. I am a voracious consumer of news and information. I am a fan of jazz, and an even bigger fan of Barcelona. I am a career diplomat, and I have dedicated the last 32 years of my life to strengthening the bonds between the United States and people all over the world, with the hope and the goal of creating a peaceful, prosperous, and safe world for us all.

When I arrived here in Caracas in December last year, I came with two main goals. First, to try to reestablish links with the Government of Venezuela, so that we can have a productive

relationship for the benefit of both of our countries. Diplomacy does not happen in the dark and having open, frank discussions is a first step toward bringing it into the light. My second goal is to help Venezuelans return their beautiful country to democracy and rebuild their economy.

Since December, I have gotten to know people here, and I am looking forward to getting to know more people and more places in the weeks and months ahead. It has been, and continues to be, my goal to give a voice to the voiceless. I will continue speaking with all sectors of society interested in becoming agents of positive change. I welcome not only the simple conversations, where we all agree, but also the tough discussions....and I know that there is no smarter and challenging group of people to talk to than university students, administrators, and professors.

In my conversations, one thing has become abundantly clear. You all want your democracy back. You want institutions you can

believe in, and an economy that allows you to earn a living and provide for your family. What you have now doesn't work and, as we've seen over the years, it doesn't work for much of the rest of world. You deserve more.

I am going to start by telling you an open secret: We – the United States – are not perfect. Slavery, the Civil War, discrimination, the Civil Rights movement, and more are clear indications that we have a lot of work to do. Our Founding Fathers, however, were geniuses. If you look at the document that is the basis for our nation, the Constitution, you see it right there in the Preamble of the Constitution:

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a MORE perfect Union...”

Our founding fathers knew that there would always be multiple viewpoints and conflicting goals. They did not seek a “perfect”

union, rather a “more perfect” union. That is the challenge of democracy everywhere, and it has always been our great challenge in the United States. (I know it must seem strange that the American CdA would say these things publicly in a foreign country, but that’s also what a democracy allows. Think about how little it happens here in Venezuela.)

Today, Venezuela is locked in an intense struggle between those who would truly defend democracy and a regime intent on maintaining power.

Why do I say this? Where’s the proof? Well, ask yourselves this question: when was the last time any “independent” institution – the ANC, the judiciary, the Electoral Council, any of them, contradicted the president, or his party? Surely, over the last five to ten years there must’ve been some differences. I don’t know this for sure, but I’m guessing you can count on one hand the number of times that has happened. **That’s not a democracy.** Democracies are messy.

Democracies are loud. Democracies offer spaces for dissent without fear of reprisal.

Instead, what is happening in Venezuela is this: the regime has taken steps to engineer the outcome of the May 20 electoral process.

- It has stacked the Venezuelan courts and Electoral Council with its cronies.
- It banned major opposition parties from participating and barred opposition leaders from standing for office.
- It has stifled the free press and jailed its political opponents.
- And, most callously, it has meted out food to manipulate the votes of hungry Venezuelans – that's the main objective of the Carnet de la Patria.

President Maduro, his regime, wants to preserve the facade of democracy while hollowing out its rights and privileges. In so doing, he wants to solidify his grip on power. I urge you to remember that,

in a democracy, the government is at the service of the people – all the people, but particularly the minority. The people should not be subjugated by the government. **That is not democracy.**

There's more, the lack of democratic governance – service to the people – in Venezuela has resulted in the collapse of your economy, a health and nutrition crisis, and the migration of more than a million of your compatriots.

You deserve better.

I know that you watch the news, and I'm sure that you see the United States and the international community talking about free, fair, and transparent elections as a basic component of any democracy. Acknowledging that each democracy is unique, what does this mean? A free and fair election should include the full participation of all political parties and leaders. It should follow an electoral calendar that allows all parties and leaders the opportunity to present their plans and perspectives to the people. It should take

place in an environment free from fear and intimidation. Venezuelans at home and abroad should be allowed a vote. It should include credible international observation. The entire electoral process should be overseen by an independent and neutral electoral authority.

And so, the United States has joined other countries from the EU, the Lima Group, as well as the courageous Venezuelan civil society, the Conferencia Episcopal de Venezuela and others, in calling on the Maduro regime to cancel the May 20 exercise. Elections should be held at a time and in a way that allows for transparency and more participation, not less, and in accordance with Venezuela's electoral law and constitution. We have asked Venezuela's National Electoral Council to review its decision to move forward, in disregard of your Constitution. We reiterate our call for the establishment of a legitimate and independent National Electoral Council, selected by the National Assembly as required by your

Constitution. And we urge the regime to provide for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.

The bottom line is simple: elections that fail to meet international standards for transparency and legitimacy also fail to meet the needs of the people. You have the right to hear the full range of options from your candidates – including, by the way, the leading candidate – President Maduro. You deserve to know that you have more than just a vote. You deserve to have a choice.

I want to be clear about one other thing: the international community is not asking anything of Venezuela that we don't practice, or strive to practice ourselves. We are not putting an onerous burden on Venezuela to be more transparent politically and economically. These are basic rules for any democracy in the world, and when they are not practiced it is the obligation of all other democracies to call foul and try to repair the rupture.

Now, the role of the international community is undoubtedly important, but we all know that role is limited. At the end of the day, Venezuelans must lead the way to a political solution for Venezuela, and that means you. Explore your options, debate, and come up with a solution – not a “perfect” solution, but a “more perfect” solution – for your democracy.

The United States and Venezuela have a shared history and shared goals. We want the same things – a healthy economy, a democratic society, and secure neighborhoods where people can work and live. We want a future for ourselves and our children where we can study and work and earn enough to provide a roof over our heads and food on our tables. We want the freedom to speak our minds, to choose our leaders, and to choose new leaders when the old ones fail to deliver on their promises. That is what democracy means.

The problems you face here in Venezuela are significant. I have seen firsthand the lack of food and medicine. I have seen the long

lines where people wait to withdraw a few Bolivares to buy a loaf of bread. Some attribute this to U.S. and international economic sanctions, but the trajectory toward economic collapse began long before the sanctions. This government's chronic economic mismanagement, corruption, arbitrary controls and restrictions choke the innovation and creativity of the Venezuelan people and deprive them of opportunities to prosper. Our sanctions – and those of the EU, Canada, and Panama – seek to prevent corrupt officials from moving to the United States, using our banks, and doing business with U.S. companies. Food and medicine are and have always been exempt from the sanctions.

And, the decision to end the sanctions altogether is ultimately in Maduro's hands. If he and his regime take the basic, but necessary steps to restore democracy, the sanctions can be lifted.

If you take nothing else from my words here today, take this: you are not alone. The United States and the international community

stand ready to provide humanitarian aid right now. We are ready to help immediately, as soon as the Venezuelan government allows it. In the meantime, the United States has given millions of dollars in assistance to Colombia and to international organizations to assist vulnerable Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring countries.

In the longer term, when democracy is restored we will also be ready to lend a hand with training and expertise to help re-establish the transparent institutions of government that all democracies require. We're ready to help rebuild the economy too. When the incredible talent of the Venezuelan people and the abundant natural resources here are freed from corruption and economic mismanagement; when Venezuelans are once again allowed to do business freely with the rest of the world, this country will flourish.

You have a friend in the United States. Today, in keeping with my firm belief in the free flow of accurate and credible news and information, I am pleased to announce that the U.S. Embassy, in

partnership with UCAB and the Centro Venezolano Americano, will invest \$140,000 to fund the creation of the Grace M. Hopper American Space in UCAB's Centro Cultural. Through this collaboration, UCAB and the surrounding community will have even greater access to accurate, credible information.

Rear Admiral Grace M. Hopper pioneered computer programming languages. Her idea of a computer language independent of machines and based on English words shaped computer code. In 1991, the United States conferred on Grace M. Hopper the highest honor to a U.S. citizen for achievements related to technological progress, an award known today as the National Medal of Technology and Innovation.

The United States will continue to support Venezuela's return to democracy and economic prosperity. However, the change has to come from within. It is your right – and it is your responsibility – to

create the democracy that you want, the democracy that you
deserve.

Thank you.

I am happy to take some questions.