

9-29-2005

Thomas Shannon To Be Assistant Secretary For Western Hemisphere Affairs

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Thomas Shannon To Be Assistant Secretary For Western Hemisphere Affairs." (2005).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9343>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Thomas Shannon To Be Assistant Secretary For Western Hemisphere Affairs

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2005-09-29

The US Senate has conducted hearings on the appointment of Thomas A. Shannon to the post of assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, the State Department's envoy to Latin America. There is little doubt Shannon will be approved, but diplomats and other interested parties have been straining to ascertain whether this appointment signals a shift in policy for the US or just a housekeeping move to rid itself of Roger Noriega, the incumbent, who has proved ineffective in the job (see NotiCen, 2005-08-05).

In his prepared statement to the Senate committee, Shannon called himself a "dusty roads diplomat," by which he said he meant he had spent 21 years working in countries in transition in Latin America and Africa. His career path, he said, has stretched from working as a vice consul doing visa work in Guatemala to being "deputy assistant secretary with responsibility for the Andes and the Caribbean," giving him program, policy, and personnel management experience. He said that would be important in his new position, where he would oversee the management and security of 50 posts and 29 consular agencies, as well as nearly 8,000 employees, including Foreign Service, civil service, and local staff, with an operating budget of more than US\$200 million.

Shannon has worked at the Organization of American States (OAS), where he was the US principal negotiator of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. He also worked, he told the committee, at the National Security Council (NSC), a job that "put me at the center of policy making and coordination." Much of the rest of Shannon's statement was devoted to a description of Bush policies in glowing terms, with little hint of whether there might be some changes in the offing but with some indication of a change in tone from the stridency of Noriega and his predecessor Otto Reich. He called the deterioration of US relations with Venezuela "tragic."

In his testimony, Shannon ventured an analysis, well-covered in the media, in which he said that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was not just bluffing when he threatened to cut off oil delivery to the US but that nothing like that would happen soon, as Venezuela is in process of finding alternative markets. Chavez is not bluffing. In this assessment, Shannon departed from many analysts who have chalked Chavez's threats up to bluster and discounted the threats because of the proximity of the US market and the fact that, because it owns Citgo gas stations and refineries in the US, Venezuela essentially sells oil to itself in the US.

One analyst, Daniel Erikson of the Inter-American Dialogue, said the oil relationship also serves to protect Venezuela because it restrains the US from taking strong action against the country. "If Venezuela had a smaller trade tie, it would give wider latitude to US policymakers," said Erikson. While firm in his contention that Chavez is not bluffing, Shannon also said, "This is a discourse that we do not seek out, and it is a discourse we would not like to have to deal with." This may be a point

of departure not only with the rhetoric of his predecessors but also with tactics that have failed in the recent past.

Both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have made swings through Latin America attempting to distance governments from Chavez, and both have been rebuffed. Now Shannon must deal not only with oil issues but also with a Venezuelan vision of development, the Alternativa Bolivariana para la America (ALBA), which has made significant headway.

Shannon said the US needed to respond to this initiative. "It is something we should be prepared to talk about," he said. The candidate also acknowledged that the US free-trade policy had failed to deliver higher living standards for many in the region, that the policy had influenced an increasing trend toward election of governments not entirely sympathetic with US plans for the region, and that Hugo Chavez is no pushover. Responding to a question from Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) on whether he could repair the relationship with Venezuela, Shannon replied, "Sir, as in so much, this depends on Hugo Chavez."

Shannon gave the strongest indication in his exchanges with Nelson that his appointment marks a change from Noriega and Reich. He didn't have much specific to say about how he would deal with the Chavez challenge to US policy, but he told the senator, "We recognize we have not done a good job that we need to do in articulating our policies and our goals in the region."

Staying hard on Cuba

It is difficult to speak of Venezuela on these questions without speaking as well of Cuba. On that, Shannon, in his opening statement, reiterated longstanding US policy. "Unwilling to accept the political repression of 11 million Cubans only 90 miles from our shores, the president undertook the most comprehensive Cuba policy review in forty years. The result was a series of policy recommendations, all implemented, that have helped limit the flow of capital to the regime, provided significant additional funding to support Cuban civil society and pro-democracy movements, and opened a breach in Cuba's information blockade through airborne transmission of Radio and TV Marti.

This review has also created a new basis for us to engage with our hemispheric partners and others as we look for common approaches to facilitate Cuba's transition to democracy," he said. Shannon then went on in his dialogue with the committee to talk about Cuba in "transition" terms and to say that one of the tasks of the new Cuba transition coordinator Caleb McCarry was to reach out to other nations and talk about what a transition to democracy would look like, making it clear there would be no acknowledgment of democracy within the Cuban system and there would be no change in the stridency of the approach.

McCarry is widely seen as cut from the same cloth as Noriega and Reich. At his appointment in July, McCarry pointed to Noriega as his mentor, and Rice said his job was to accelerate the demise of Castro's tyranny. Weak on Nicaragua Shannon was short on specifics across the board, but he displayed some weakness in his assessment of Nicaragua, where Noriega has made a particular

mess of things, first by sending Oliver Garza to Nicaragua in July to try to pressure the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) to heal its internal split to unite against the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), and again in September, when he threatened a "strong response" if the Nicaraguan political stalemate continued. Besides being based on a hopelessly naive analysis of the situation, the gestures proved useful to US nemesis Daniel Ortega, the FSLN presidential candidate, who seized upon the situation to accuse the US of interference and of trying to prevent a Sandinista victory.

At the hearing, Shannon grouped the Nicaragua crisis with the situations in Ecuador and Bolivia, and he argued these countries were in turmoil because their institutions were incapable of absorbing crises, leading to the rise of populist leaders who bypass traditional parties. He said the Bush administration would work with the OAS and other groups to make political parties stronger. A dispassionate reading of Nicaragua's recent history would indicate this policy would be counterproductive in resolving its governmental stalemate (see NotiCen, 2005-06-16).

-- End --