

Memo: Who Is the Future US Ambassador to Guatemala?

Career Diplomat William Popp to Replace Luis Arreaga



On July 23, the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations held a hearing on Popp's nomination. ([US Senate](#))

On May 28, President Donald Trump **announced** his will to nominate career diplomat William Wayne Popp to replace Luis Arreaga as the US ambassador to Guatemala. The nomination has received approval from the US Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations and is pending confirmation from the full US Senate.

Popp holds a B.A. from Westminster College, a M.A. from George Washington University, and a M.S. in national security strategy from the National War College. He speaks Portuguese and Spanish and has received several US State Department awards.

Past Experience

- November 2018–early 2020: chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Brasilia, Brazil.
- August 2017: deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Brasilia, Brazil.
- December 2016: acting deputy chief at the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.

- August 2015: political counselor at the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.
- Director of the Office of Economic Policy and Summit Coordination at the US State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.
- Deputy consul general at the US consulate general in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- Acting consul general at the US consulate general in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- Deputy economic counselor at the US embassy in Bogota, Colombia.

What has been current Ambassador Arreaga's performance during his tenure?

Electoral Meddling

Upon arriving in Guatemala in October 2017, Luis Arreaga began supporting the now-defunct International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). The CICIG, a foreign entity backed by the United Nations and the country's progressive elites, had an interest in tilting the 2019 Guatemalan presidential election. In 2018, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) allowed the CICIG to play an illegal role in overseeing political campaigns, media coverage, and voting procedures.

Arreaga put the US embassy's full weight behind the CICIG, even though its unchecked power had led to abuses in criminal investigations and the appointment of judges and prosecutors. In the run-up to the election, the ambassador publicly expressed his support for Sandra Torres, the left-wing National Unity of Hope's presidential candidate.

Political Obstacles

In July 2019, Judicial Watch reported Arreaga was collaborating with a group of US State Department officials to undermine Trump's immigration agenda.

Arreaga tried to sabotage the signing of an asylum agreement between Trump and then Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales to reduce migration toward the United States and to promote economic opportunities in Guatemala. Several media outlets reported the White House called Arreaga after the first deal fell through. Nevertheless, both countries ended up signing the agreement at the end of July.

Has Popp or his previous offices been involved in any controversies?

Brazil

In light of the unprecedented fires that ravaged the Amazon rainforest in 2019, 12 Democratic senators sent an open letter to Popp, then chargé d'affaires in Brazil. They urged Popp to engage with President Jair Bolsonaro. For the US lawmakers, Bolsonaro's policies were fueling deforestation in the Amazon.

On September 27, 2019, the US embassy in Brasilia released a statement in

which Popp [said](#), “The United States is working closely with Brazilian experts to combat and minimize the harm of this year’s Amazon fires.”

In addition, the US embassy, headed by Ambassador Todd Chapman, has been involved in a series of conflicts about the US-China [trade war](#). The latest controversy concerns Brazil’s plan to deploy [5G technology](#) with Huawei’s support.

Kenya

In December 2016, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta [accused](#) the United States of trying to meddle in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. As a result, he decided to suspend a US aid program to provide electoral assistance. Robert Godec, then US ambassador to Kenya, rejected the president’s statement and claimed the United States just sought to promote free, fair, peaceful, and credible elections.

Kenyatta’s reelection in August 2017 was [controversial](#). Opposition leader Raila Odinga refused to accept the results, alleging fraud, and the country’s supreme court ordered a new presidential election that took place in October 2017.

However, citing persistent irregularities, Odinga withdrew from the October election and asked his supporters to stay home. His name remained on the ballot, and the turnout was more than 60 percent less than in August. Kenyatta came out on top once again.

What media appearances has he made?

- In February 2020, the mainstream Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* [featured](#) Popp’s comments on the US-China trade war and on Brazil’s rollout of 5G technology.
- In November 2019, Popp [spoke](#) with Brazilian daily *Estadão* about bilateral relations and his desire to increase opportunities for Brazilian students to attend US universities.
- In April 2019, *DefesaNet* [interviewed](#) Popp on the US designation of Brazil as a major non-NATO ally.
- In March 2015, the Ecuadorian TV station Televistazo [interviewed Popp](#), then director of the Office of Economic Policy and Summit Coordination in the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, about Vital Voices, an economic empowerment program conducted by the US State Department.
- In February 2014, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) an Obama initiative to secure a trade partnership between small-business centers in the United States and Mexico. The newspaper interviewed Popp, since he facilitated the partnership between George Mason University’s Enterprise Center and the Autonomous University of Nuevo León.

Where does his nomination stand and what has been the reception so far?

On [July 23](#), the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations held a hearing on Popp's nomination. During the event, Popp [laid out](#) his plan for the US embassy in Guatemala. On July 29, the committee unanimously [greenlighted](#) his nomination and included it in the Senate Executive Calendar for a full vote. If confirmed by the Senate floor, Popp [will take office](#) in the last quarter of 2020.

Popp has no known adversaries so far, and observers across the spectrum have commented he is a professional diplomat without political affiliation. Whether he will follow in the footsteps of his predecessor or respect the rule of law in Guatemala remains to be seen.

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