

US ambassador to Venezuela ends term

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

After three rocky years as Washington's top envoy to Venezuela, Ambassador William Brownfield ended his term Wednesday with regrets he could not do more to establish a dialogue with President Hugo Chavez's government.

Brownfield, who is taking over as ambassador to Colombia, attended a flag-raising ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Caracas as he prepared to depart.

"I regret that I haven't managed to establish a direct, serious, pragmatic dialogue between the two governments, a dialogue to resolve problems," Brownfield told reporters Tuesday.

Brownfield took over as ambassador to Caracas in August 2004, and his tenure was marked by growing hostility between the two governments. On at least two occasions, Chavez threatened to expel Brownfield, accusing him of meddling in Venezuela's affairs.

A career diplomat from Texas with a penchant for understatement that at times verged on sarcasm, Brownfield drew Chavez's anger by voicing Washington's concerns about the Venezuelan government and handing out donations to youth baseball leagues and charities in pro-Chavez slums.

Chavez first threatened to expel Brownfield last year after accusing him of provoking a confrontation by visiting a poor pro-government area where protesters beat on the ambassador's car, hurled eggs and chased his convoy.

Brownfield responded to Chavez by saying often that he hoped the two countries could find common ground in areas of mutual interest.

He said more work is needed on counterterrorism and counter-drug cooperation - both of which Washington says have been severely deficient under Chavez.

Asked about Chavez's recent spate of arms purchases, Brownfield said it is important for Venezuela to be open about those deals to avoid "the domino effect producing a weapons race" in the region. "I believe the solution is transparency," he said.

Brownfield is being replaced by Patrick Duddy, a senior official in the State Department's Latin America bureau.