

**Opening Statement of Courtney Diesel O'Donnell  
Nominee for U.S. Permanent Representative to the  
UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, with rank of Ambassador  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
January 25, 2024**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as President Biden's nominee to serve as the United States Representative to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. I am grateful to both President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken for the trust and the confidence they have bestowed on me.

I would not be here today without the unconditional love of family and friends. While my father is no longer with us, he remains the strongest force in my life. Thanks to my mother, Phyllis, a retired educator in St. Louis, my sons Felix and Oliver, watching from California, and my sister Kelly who's here today. To my husband Cassidy - you are my source of strength.

I grew up in a tight-knit family, close to my grandmother, a social worker who worked with children with special needs, and my grandfather, who ran a Catholic charity and served as mayor of their small town. Their example inspired my deep commitment to public service.

I love this country and have had the honor of serving in senior roles in two presidential administrations on a range of issues relevant to this role. In the office of then Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden, I led partnerships with UNESCO to promote America's vocational and community college institutions globally. In the office of Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff, I worked to combat antisemitism, one of UNESCO's most urgent mandates. I also bring experience from over a decade leading global teams and initiatives in the private sector to this position.

President Biden has frequently noted, the United States is stronger, safer and more prosperous when we engage with the rest of the world - including American leadership in multilateral organizations. I am fully aware that UNESCO, like all international institutions, is an imperfect body. But issues critical to U.S. national security are being addressed at UNESCO, and now that the U.S. has returned and been elected to the Executive Board, our strong presence is required. If confirmed, I will use the full strength of this position to ensure that U.S. interests remain at the center of our engagement.

Many people know of UNESCO in association with their World Heritage Sites and efforts to preserve irreplaceable cultural treasures. But the organization also plays a role in many other areas impacting America's national security interests - from developing norms for emerging technologies like A.I. and neurotechnology, protecting journalists doing vital work, leading scientific collaborations, and expanding STEM education programs to women and girls.

If confirmed, I would advocate for America's foreign policy goals, with a focus on three key areas - (1) to counter the influence of the PRC, Russia and other authoritarian states and

competitors; (2) combat antisemitism and counter anti-Israel bias; and, (3) ensure UNESCO is operating efficiently and transparently, with the highest level of accountability. If confirmed, I would do so in close collaboration with the members of this committee.

We know the PRC works through UN agencies, such as UNESCO, to undermine the United States' values and interests, and as well as those of our allies and partners. If confirmed, I would rally those allies and seek additional partners to take aggressive, unified positions at UNESCO to counter these malevolent activities.

Importantly, UNESCO is the only UN agency specifically charged with promoting Holocaust education efforts. In the wake of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel and the related rise of antisemitism worldwide, this work has never been more urgent. Too often at UNESCO, as in other UN bodies, Israel is singled out for criticism, abuse and attack. If confirmed, countering antisemitism and hate in all forms will be among my highest priorities, building upon my experience working on the first-ever U.S. National Strategy to Combat Anti-Semitism. I will also be proud to stand with our Israeli partners and allies to challenge this unacceptable discrimination.

I would work to ensure that UNESCO is operating efficiently and transparently, with the highest level of accountability, and in line with U.S. interests. I take seriously the responsibility to ensure U.S. taxpayer dollars are used wisely. Since my nomination, I have greatly benefited from consultations with the members and staff of this Committee on this issue. I value the role that this Committee and Congress plays in the execution of our foreign policy and oversight, and if confirmed, I look forward to continuing this collaboration, and receiving your input and counsel.

UNESCO is an imperfect body. But now more than ever, we cannot allow a vacuum, nor can we cede our leadership role to strategic competitors such as the PRC; nor can we miss an opportunity to call out and combat antisemitism in real-time. Restoring American leadership at UNESCO with a Senate confirmed Ambassador is critical for advancing these priorities.

If confirmed, it would be the honor of a lifetime to serve my country in this capacity. I look forward to your questions.