

Statement of Kathleen A. FitzGibbon
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Niger
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
March 1, 2023

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you as President Biden's nominee for United States Ambassador to the Republic of Niger. I deeply appreciate the confidence and trust the President and Secretary of State have shown in nominating me for this position. Thank you for your consideration and if confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress to advance our interests in Niger. My family members could not be here today, but because of their support, I am sitting before this committee. My father, sisters and brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins are watching from Bills country in Western New York and our family outposts in North Carolina and Washington State. My mother and sister are no longer with us, but they also were important players in my story.

My commitment to sub-Saharan Africa began as a Hartwick College intern at INTERACTION, where I worked with non-governmental organizations and the Select Committee on Hunger mustering support during the Ethiopian famine in 1984. This motivated my academic focus on African politics and development at the University of California at Davis and teaching African politics at Mary Washington College. These experiences enabled me to springboard into diplomatic service, which was a lifelong dream that seemed out of reach from my small, working-class town of Caledonia, New York. I started my State Department career as a civil service officer and then converted into the Foreign Service, thanks to a program initiated by Secretary Powell to make our diplomatic face abroad look more like America.

My dream job has allowed me to be a participant at historic junctures in Nigeria, Chad, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe. These assignments built my expertise on security and counterterrorism, conflict resolution, refugee and migration affairs, trafficking in persons, human rights, democratic reforms, commercial advocacy, as well as humanitarian and health diplomacy. I led interagency teams and managed U.S. government resources as Deputy Chief of Mission in Gabon, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria and as the Charge d'Affaires for a year in Sierra Leone during the West African Ebola crisis. In these positions, I mentored our next generation of diplomats so they could have the skills they need to succeed.

I also take very seriously my responsibility to protect U.S. citizens overseas. Serving in Africa, I coordinated military and law enforcement activities during numerous situations of political unrest, terrorist threats, and kidnapping-for-ransom cases. In 2020, I secured Nigerian permission for a successful cross-border rescue of an American hostage.

If confirmed, I will make use of these rich experiences to reinforce the strong partnership between Niger and the United States of America. Niger faces major terrorist threats on multiple borders and is a critical partner in our efforts to combat violent extremism and in strengthening democratic governance and adherence to international humanitarian law across West Africa. It is a linchpin in our re-balanced stabilization strategy for the Sahel that seeks governance solutions to the security problems plaguing Niger and its neighbors. Our objective is to address Niger's many development deficits while strengthening its military capacity to restore the security necessary to defeat terrorists on and within its borders. If confirmed, I will lead our interagency team's efforts to enhance the government's delivery of critical services in education, health, agriculture, food security, and the rule of law. Through these efforts, I will seek to deepen Niger's democracy, provide economic opportunity, and deny violent extremist organizations the ability to recruit neglected youths. Fundamental to our assistance strategy is the promotion of respect for human rights and humanitarian principles, for which I will be a relentless advocate.

Early in my career, female activists told then-Secretary Albright that "in Africa, poverty has a woman's face." These words resonate as a sobering reality in Niger. I am looking forward to working with President Bazoum, who is prioritizing the betterment of women and girls as a major pillar of the country's economic development plan. Our USAID mission, which reopened after a 22-year absence, is a critical player in our whole-of-government approach to investing in the Nigerien people, especially women and girls. This long-term investment will require buy-in from Niger's political class, a challenge that I will gladly take up though I also understand that local absorptive capacity may limit the pace of our progress. Finally, I will support inclusive democratic processes and transparency to strengthen the foundation of governance necessary to meet the aspirations of Niger's youthful population.

The United States has an important role and stake in helping Niger succeed in its uphill battle. If confirmed, I look forward to leading U.S. government efforts to consolidate Niger's democratic gains and create a secure environment in which

Nigeriens can prosper. Close coordination and consultation with Congress will be essential to achieving these goals.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.