

**Opening Statement of James Holtsnider
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Independent State of Samoa
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
September 19, 2024**

Chairwoman Duckworth, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be the United States Ambassador to the Independent State of Samoa.

I am honored by this nomination and grateful to the President and Secretary Blinken for the confidence they have shown in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with this committee and Congress to advance U.S. foreign policy interests in Samoa.

I want to thank my family who just flew in from Iowa – my wife Nana and our children Maud and Henry – for their unwavering support and sacrifice throughout my career, especially during my time in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

When I was a young, enlisted Marine assigned to Combat Service Support Group 3 in Hawaii in the 1990s, I never imagined that more than 25 years later I would be honored to be asked to serve again in the Pacific.

The United States is a Pacific nation, and we share longstanding historic and cultural ties with our Samoan neighbors. Samoa is a leader in security and economic stability in the Pacific region. Samoa has a strong commitment to free trade, and it has exhibited unique leadership in forging a stronger partnership with the Pacific Islands Forum. At the same time, Samoa faces significant challenges to its security and prosperity. Samoa has been affected by rising sea levels, multiple natural disasters in recent decades, and significant economic shocks, making the country more vulnerable to malign influence from the PRC. Through foreign assistance and robust public messaging campaigns, the PRC has moved aggressively to assert itself in Samoa, especially as Samoa is strategically located near key shipping routes and telecommunication links connecting the United States with Asia and Oceania.

To foster a free and open Pacific, protect global security, and advance U.S. interests in the region, our team at the U.S. Embassy in Apia under Ambassador Udall's

leadership is expanding mutually beneficial support to Samoa, particularly on security matters. Embassy Apia and our interagency counterparts are partnering with Samoan law enforcement to protect Samoa's maritime resources, to eliminate illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and to combat transnational crime and drug smuggling.

Our small team in Apia is doing excellent work to highlight America's shared values with Samoa and America's value to Samoa. We have returned Peace Corps volunteers to Samoa, updated the bilateral shiprider agreement in April, conducted U.S. military medical missions, begun a State Partnership Program with the Nevada National Guard, increased engagements with senior U.S. officials, assisted with disaster preparedness, and hosted the Young Pacific Leaders annual conference and regional workshop in Samoa. As we engage closely with Samoan officials, we must also work closely with partners and allies in the region to give Samoa and its people opportunities and options in a free and open Pacific region.

If confirmed, I would become the first resident U.S. ambassador in Samoa since the country's independence, providing a tangible symbol of U.S. commitment to engagement and the bilateral relationship.

Samoa is an important multilateral partner on many global issues, including contributing to global security through peacekeeping operations. If confirmed, I will encourage Samoa to implement a foreign policy that reflects shared American and Samoan values and increases Samoa's concurrence with U.S. interests in international institutions. As a responsible democracy, Samoa is uniquely positioned to contribute to regional stability. If confirmed, I will encourage the Samoan government to continue to play a constructive role as a regional leader and spread the Samoan model of democracy, peace, and stability.

Through targeted assistance, we will continue to support good governance initiatives to promote opportunities and sustainability for Samoa and its people. For example, we are working with Samoa to safeguard biodiversity, prepare for emergency response to tsunamis, and improve health outcomes in the medical system. And we are doing so with no strings attached.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the dozens of people in the Department of State and on your Congressional staff who assisted with the nomination process. I

continue to be impressed by the high quality of Americans in public service in the Department and in the Congress. I would also like to thank the Members of this committee for their sustained focus on our island partners and for helping provide the funds and authorities needed to open our embassies in the Pacific.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.