

Statement of Kenneth H. Merten
Ambassador-designate to the Republic of Croatia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
March 21, 2012

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a privilege to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to serve as the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Croatia. I am honored by the confidence placed in me by the President and Secretary Clinton. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee and the Congress in advancing U.S. interests in Croatia.

I am delighted and proud to be accompanied today by my wife Susan and my daughter Elisabeth. My daughter Caryl could not get away from university in Charlottesville to join us. We have been a Foreign Service family for over twenty years and have all felt proud to be given the chance to represent the United States at postings in Germany, France, at our Mission to the European Union and three times in Haiti. As you are aware, my most recent assignment in Haiti was more eventful than we had hoped, but I am proud of the way my family and my colleagues at the Embassy responded following the earthquake, to come to the aid of the Haitian people and to evacuate over 16,000 American citizens. While I hope not to face any similar crises in Croatia, my experience in Haiti demonstrates that I am an effective manager of people and resources, critical for any Chief of Mission.

Our bilateral relationship with Croatia has never been stronger. In fact, this afternoon Secretary Clinton will meet with Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic to discuss our many common interests and how we will further strengthen our partnership under Croatia's new government. Just a few weeks ago, Attorney General Holder met with his Croatian counterpart to discuss our cooperation on rule of law issues, including Croatia's ongoing efforts to root out corruption and bring suspected war criminals to justice. We have a robust military-to-military relationship, which includes a joint NATO unit in Afghanistan and the State Partnership Program with the Minnesota National Guard. Next month, we will host the second Brown Forum, a regional conference held in honor of former Commerce Secretary Ron Brown focused on how to create positive conditions for increased trade and investment among the United States, Croatia, and the region. And these are only a few examples to illustrate our strong ties.

Croatia has made remarkable progress in only two decades since independence and a costly war, becoming a NATO member in 2009, and now standing on the threshold of the European Union, with full EU membership expected in 2013. The citizens of Croatia deserve to be congratulated for all they have accomplished. Croatia's success in implementing often difficult reforms and creating a strong democratic society demonstrate that it is positioned to serve as a role model and leader in the region for European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Indeed, the United States supports the positive decisions Croatia has made to improve regional cooperation. We also encourage Croatian leaders to continue their efforts toward good neighborly relations and to continue working with neighbors to address bilateral and regional challenges such as refugees and transnational crime. As an international partner, Croatia has proven itself to be an active and committed NATO ally, as evidenced by its important contributions to global security, particularly in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), and UN peacekeeping activities. These contributions to regional and global stability reflect our shared values and the depth of our partnership with Croatia.

While Croatia has come a great distance in terms of democratic progress, there is more to be done. The Croatian economy continues to be challenged by high unemployment and anemic growth. This reflects both the global economic crisis and domestic challenges, including a cumbersome bureaucracy and an investment climate that needs to be much more welcoming to business. The recently-elected Croatian government recognizes the urgent need for economic reform. The United States will support Croatia's efforts to undertake reforms to improve the business and investment climate so that sustainable economic growth and prosperity can be achieved. This in turn can be the basis for expanding our economic and trade relations.

If I am confirmed, I will seek to forge an even stronger partnership with Croatia, building on the excellent work of our outgoing Ambassador, James Foley, and our country team in Zagreb. My foremost priority as Ambassador will be promoting U.S. interests in Croatia while pursuing our goals of strengthening the rule of law, fighting corruption, promoting economic growth and prosperity, reinforcing democratic institutions, and promoting regional security. I will actively seek to deepen our strategic alliance through NATO, ISAF, the Adriatic Charter, and other cooperative means. I will also work closely with our EU partners to help Croatia complete the few remaining accession requirements and look forward to celebrating its full EU membership in 2013.

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.