

**TESTIMONY OF MARK PEKALA
AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
March 21, 2012**

Madam Chairman, distinguished Members of the Committee,

It is a genuine privilege to appear before you today, and I thank you. I am deeply grateful to President Obama and Secretary Clinton for their support and confidence in nominating me to be the next U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Latvia. If confirmed by the Senate, I pledge to devote all my energy to represent the United States to the very best of my ability and to advance U.S. interests in Latvia, while further strengthening the partnership between our two countries. I am fully committed to working closely with this Committee, your staff, and your Congressional colleagues to advance our common objectives and shared agenda.

With your permission, I would like to introduce my wife Maria. We are the very happy and proud parents of Julia and Nora, age 10 and 7, who have spent nearly two-thirds of their lives overseas while Maria and I have tried our best to represent the American people.

Over the last 10 of my nearly 25 years of Government service, I have served as Deputy Chief of Mission in France, Deputy Chief of Mission in Estonia, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, responsible for our bilateral relations with 15 European countries, including Latvia, and as Director of the Entry-Level Division

of Human Resources at the State Department. I believe that these experiences have prepared me well, if confirmed, to lead our Mission – and to exercise American leadership – in Latvia.

Last year, Latvia celebrated the twentieth anniversary of regaining its independence; 2012 will mark 90 years of unbroken diplomatic relations with our friend and ally. Since 1991, Latvia has embraced democracy and the principles of an open market. It is an excellent partner and a good environment in which to carry out the President's National Export Initiative, dedicated to supporting U.S. businesses, increasing U.S. exports, and creating jobs in the United States. If confirmed, I will work with U.S. businesses to expand their markets into Latvia. U.S. exports to Latvia have been rising over the past two years, and recent successful advocacy by Embassy Riga on behalf of American companies IBM and DataCard demonstrates that there is scope for expanded U.S. investment in the Latvian market.

Latvia was hit extraordinarily hard by the economic crisis, losing nearly 25% of GDP in the global economic crisis. But it has proven itself to be both resilient and innovative in meeting its economic obligations and finding creative ways to offer its expertise to its post-Soviet neighbors. After weathering its economic storm, Latvia is actively contributing to assistance projects in Moldova, including a rule of law program in cooperation with USAID. Latvia also provides training for

Afghan railroad officials and is planning to participate in a training program for Afghan air traffic controllers. If confirmed, I will work with Latvia to continue this crucial development engagement.

In 2004, Latvia joined NATO. It is a valued member of the Alliance, contributing approximately 200 troops and police trainers in Afghanistan. In addition, the Latvian National Armed Forces have successfully developed a high-demand niche capability with their Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) program. Latvia is one of only six other Allied countries certified to call in U.S. close air support on the battlefield. Standing with the Alliance has not come without cost; Latvia has suffered the loss of four soldiers and had nine wounded during its years in Afghanistan. We are deeply grateful for Latvia's contributions and for its decision to remain with us in Afghanistan until 2014.

As a native of Michigan, I am particularly proud of Latvia's partnership with the Michigan National Guard, now in its twentieth year. In Afghanistan, Latvia successfully ran an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) with the Guard. Today, Latvia is once again teaming up with its National Guard partners to train soldiers in Liberia – an effort that underlines not only how far Latvia has come in the twenty years since it regained its independence, but also its increasing focus on venturing outside its neighborhood to share the valuable lessons learned during its evolution from newly independent country to mature democracy.

Although Latvia has made tremendous strides in democracy and rule of law, it is still struggling to come to terms with some aspects of its past, particularly the legacies of World War II and Soviet rule. Latvia has work to do to promote social integration of its minority populations. Almost a third of Latvia's residents are ethnic Russians, of whom just under 300,000 are non-citizens. We are encouraged to see the Latvian Government considering measures that would improve integration of this population; we hope that the recent language referendum can be used by both sides as a means to open a constructive dialog between ethnic Russians and ethnic Latvians. If confirmed, I hope to use my position as ambassador to support outreach efforts to all minority communities in Latvia.

Latvia is also making progress in coming to terms with the horrific events of the Holocaust, but more needs to be done. The restitution of private property is largely finished, but we need to see further progress on compensation for communal and heirless properties. If confirmed, I pledge to work diligently with the Government of Latvia and the local Jewish community to address Holocaust legacy and property restitution issues.

Should the Senate confirm my nomination, I will dedicate myself to protecting and advancing U.S. interests in Latvia. I thank you again for the privilege of appearing before you today and I welcome any questions you may have.