

Statement of Robert J. Callahan  
Ambassador-Designate to Nicaragua  
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
April 16, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is an honor and pleasure to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be the United States' ambassador to Nicaragua. I am profoundly grateful to President Bush and Secretary of State Rice for the confidence they have placed in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the members of this committee and your colleagues in the Congress to promote our policies in Nicaragua and, when appropriate, throughout the region.

If I may, I would like to take a moment to introduce several people: first, my wife, Debbie, who has been my life partner for over 30 years and my closest confidante during 28 years in the Foreign Service and who, if I am confirmed, will give up her job and accompany me once again on a foreign assignment; next, my younger son Emmett, who spent all but three years of his youth abroad as I served in various cities on two continents, as did his older brother, Andrew, who is living in New York and couldn't be here today; and, finally, a number of my current and former

students from George Washington University, who have come to the hearing to witness this committee discharge its Constitutional responsibilities.

If confirmed, this will be my eighth overseas assignment and my fourth posting to Latin America, but my first since I left Bolivia in 1992. As someone who has developed a keen appreciation of, and a genuine affection for, Latin American culture, the Spanish language, and the profession of diplomacy, I eagerly welcome the assignment.

I also think that my varied career with the State Department, which has taken me from the diverse cultural expressions of Bolivia to the former center of the great Muslim caliphate in Baghdad, from the enduring charms of San Jose and Tegucigalpa to the imperial radiance of London, Athens, and Rome, has provided me with the experience and knowledge to lead effectively our mission in Managua, should the Senate confirm me.

I am no stranger to challenging assignments, and I do think that Nicaragua will prove to be just that. There is, to begin with, what T.S. Elliot called “the persistence of memory,” which of course is not unique to Nicaragua. I would never suggest that we should ignore history; just that

our thoughts and actions should not become hostage to the past. There are too many common interests between the United States and Nicaragua, too many problems that require our mutual attention, resources, and energy, to dwell on what we might have done to each other decades or even centuries ago. Acknowledge it, to be sure, and learn from it, but then move on.

Every member of this committee, and every American who reads a paper or watches the news, has recently come across intemperate words directed against the United States from certain Latin American countries, and unfortunately Nicaragua has at times been among them. This kind of rhetoric can sting, even wound, and national leaders should be prudent in their language, measured in their criticism. That said, and much to our credit and forbearance, the United States has paid more attention to Nicaraguan deeds than words, and this would seem to be the right approach.

Our commitment to the Western Hemisphere -- consolidating democracy, promoting prosperity, investing in people, and protecting the security of the democratic state -- is nowhere more in evidence than in Nicaragua.

Working closely with Nicaraguans from the government, police, and military, from business and labor, and from charitable and religious organizations, we have achieved some notable successes on a range of issues. Through the Millennium Challenge Account, our bilateral aid, the Central American Free Trade agreement, and other initiatives, we have helped Nicaragua develop its economy. We provided over \$15 million in immediate assistance when Hurricane Felix devastated the country's North coast last year. In the fight against drugs, our two countries have worked together to seize more than 3 metric tons of cocaine so far this year, which follows the seizure of 13 metric tons in 2007.

If confirmed, I will continue to support our efforts to build a strong, sustainable, and mutually beneficial partnership with Nicaragua, and I will regard as my most important responsibility the protection of American citizens in Nicaragua.

Our official presence in Nicaragua includes representatives from a dozen agencies of the Federal government as well as 165 Peace Corps volunteers, all doing extraordinary work under difficult conditions.

I will endeavor, as my predecessors have done, to provide a high level of service to American citizens living in and visiting Nicaragua. In addition, and should I be confirmed, I would eagerly welcome your visiting. Your presence provides excellent opportunities to engage Nicaraguans at every level.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I recognize that there are many challenges in further developing our relationship with Nicaragua. If confirmed, I will work conscientiously to promote U.S. interests and develop a partnership with the government and people of that beautiful country. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before your Committee. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.