

**Statement of John D. Feeley
Ambassador-Designate to Panama
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
December 1, 2015**

Mister Chairman, Members of the Committee.

From the oath I swore as an Eagle Scout, to the one I took upon commissioning as a Second Lieutenant of Marines, and the oath by which I have lived and worked for 25 years as a Foreign Service Officer advancing American interests in the Western Hemisphere, my life and career have been marked by public service.

This is an enormous privilege. I thank the President and the Secretary for the confidence they have shown in me by their nomination. I realize just how fortunate I am. And it is in that spirit of gratitude that I come before you today to seek your approval that I might continue serving our nation as Ambassador to Panama.

I am joined today by my wife of 31 years, 2 sons, one grandson, and 17 Permanent Change of Station pack outs and moves, a Senior Foreign Service officer herself from San Juan, Puerto Rico, Cherie Feeley.

In my current position at the State Department, I oversee the daily operations of our 53 embassies and consulates, from Canada to the Caribbean, from Mexico to Argentina.

I work on the operating budgets, the foreign assistance programs, and the personnel assignments that undergird American diplomacy throughout this hemisphere.

The food we eat, the energy we consume, and the goods and services we trade with our neighbors in the Americas have more of an impact on the daily lives of our country's citizens than any other region of the world.

So it is vitally important that we know and understand these neighbors and partners to ensure our own security and prosperity. This is the essence of the President's Strategy for Engagement in Central America.

And Panama, whose destiny has been entwined with ours since its founding, is among the most critical of our partners in achieving the security, prosperity, and governance goals of the Strategy.

Panama is a good news story in many aspects, and if confirmed, I will work with this committee to deepen and expand what is already an excellent bilateral relationship.

Panama shares our commitment to protecting democratic freedoms and human rights. Since 1989, Panamanians have consistently deepened their own democratic culture.

In 2014, they defied polls and, with the help of robust international election monitoring, elected an underdog candidate as President who has made education and anti-corruption pillars of his vision for Panama's future.

You will recall that Panama served as host of the Summit of the Americas earlier this year, where landmark encounters between civil society organizations and the region's leaders occurred.

Panama is also a partner on the global stage. Under President Juan Carlos Varela's leadership, Panama is to date, the only Latin American member of the coalition against ISIL.

Given its stability and relative prosperity, Panama – like the United States – is a destination, rather than a source, of immigration in the region. As such, Panama understands the evils of human trafficking and was recently upgraded on our annual Trafficking in Persons Report.

If confirmed, I will continue the good work already begun with our Panamanian partners to eradicate this form of modern slavery.

Panama's geographic location makes it a bridge in both the physical and metaphysical sense of the word. With a robust economy, Panama has leveraged its bridging function to become a logistical center for the region.

The Canal is a vital commercial corridor for the United States: two of every three ships transiting the Canal will stop at a U.S. port.

And the global traffic across the bridge that is Panama will be accentuated by the Panama Canal expansion, due to be completed in 2016. This expansion will bring benefits to Panama and the United States, potentially doubling imports on the U.S. East and Gulf Coasts by 2029.

Put simply: The expansion will lower shipping costs between the United States and Asia, expand our markets, and create jobs for American workers.

Another good news story: Panama is among our best partners working on education and innovation. The literacy rate for 15-year-olds is around 94 percent.

“Bilingual Panama” is the Panamanian government’s ambitious plan to bring thousands of Panamanian English teachers to study in U.S. universities over the next five years, and we support that effort.

As the son of an English professor and the husband of a native Spanish speaker, no issue could be closer to my personal interest than that of contributing to a bilingual, bicultural, more integrated future in the Americas. With your consent, I will do so in Panama.

Now, Mister Chairman, Panama is not without challenges.

Its bridging location renders it vulnerable to organized crime. I mentioned trafficking in persons. Narcotics trafficking and money laundering – and the corruption that is attendant to those illicit activities – are also threats to Panama’s security and prosperity.

Economic challenges include stubborn income inequality and poverty despite a decade of growth, inadequate public infrastructure, and limited economic development outside of Panama City.

If confirmed, I will work with Panama as it addresses these challenges, doing so in support of U.S. priorities such as:

- our significant retiree and expatriate population,
- greater foreign direct investment opportunities for American business,
- and, the integrity of our interconnected financial and banking systems.

I thank you for this opportunity and welcome your questions.