

Statement of Justin Bytheway
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Tonga
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 30, 2026

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'm grateful to President Trump and Secretary Rubio for the confidence they've shown in nominating me to serve as United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Tonga.

I'm here alone today, which is not my normal state of affairs. My wife, Sarah, is back at our home in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, overseeing a house full of seven kids. She wanted to be here for such an important occasion but given the logistics of additional travel for a family of nine, we decided it made more sense for them to remain at home. None of what I have accomplished during my career in the Foreign Service would have been possible without her. My family has shared the adventures and demands of Foreign Service life across six overseas assignments, and if confirmed, I look forward to having them accompany me to Tonga. To Sarah, Elliott, Eleanor, Frances, Henry, Mabel, Matilda, and Walter: I love you and look forward to being back with you soon.

It's an incredible honor for a kid from rural Glenwood, Utah – population 474 – to sit before this committee as a nominee to represent the United States as an Ambassador. There is something uniquely American about that opportunity, and I am deeply grateful for it. What makes this nomination especially meaningful is the opportunity not simply to lead an embassy, but to help shape one still in its early years. If confirmed as our first resident Ambassador to Tonga, I would feel a particular responsibility to establish the relationships, culture, and foundations that will shape our presence there for years to come.

I want to be clear about the lens I would bring to this role if confirmed: America First. Every engagement, every program, and every hour we invest in Tonga will serve American workers, American businesses, and American security — while respecting Tonga as a sovereign partner. The United States can offer Tonga something real: reliable investment, honest partnership, and a long-term commitment. If confirmed, I'll work every day to make sure American interests and Tongan interests move forward together.

Tonga doesn't dominate headlines, but it matters – strategically. Our longstanding partnership is now entering its most active and high-impact chapter yet. Recent months have brought new maritime security cooperation to push back on illegal fishing, fresh investment in undersea cable connectivity, and a partnership on

responsible seabed mineral research. The Millennium Challenge Corporation selected Tonga to develop a threshold program focused on energy and digital technology. These efforts can help ensure these strategic sectors develop in ways that advance both Tongan prosperity and American interests.

If confirmed, I intend to build on that momentum. One of my top priorities would be helping Tonga resist coercion and malign influence. I would work to help Tonga protect its waters and financial system from transnational criminal networks that seek to exploit the Pacific's vast maritime distances. And I would partner with Tongan businesses to help them grow through trade with America. I would push hard on digital and energy infrastructure, because whoever builds Tonga's cables and power grids shapes its future alignment for a generation. I don't intend to cede that ground.

Tonga is one of only three Pacific Islands countries with a military, and His Majesty King Tupou VI is a graduate of the U.S. Naval War College. The United States signed a Status of Forces Agreement with Tonga in 1992. Between 2004 and 2014, Tonga deployed four contingents to Iraq and over 300 soldiers to Afghanistan. For an armed force numbering only several hundred, that represents an extraordinary commitment to fighting alongside American and coalition troops. As the first United States Ambassador resident in Tonga, if confirmed, I would use my position to drive Department of War cooperation with Tonga. And I'll be candid about the broader stakes: Strategic competitors are courting Pacific nations aggressively. My job, if confirmed, will be to make sure Tonga never has to wonder who its most reliable partner is.

Lastly, America's relationship with Tonga is strengthened by ties built over generations. Peace Corps will celebrate 60 years in Tonga next year, an extraordinary legacy of Americans living and serving alongside Tongan communities. The Tongan-American community, particularly in Utah, California, and Hawaii, provides another natural bridge for business, education, faith, and family ties. I would connect Tongan talent and entrepreneurs with American businesses and opportunities and expand sports diplomacy, including through American football, where Tongan and Tongan-American athletes have made an extraordinary impact. Our strong communities of faith provide another natural connection between our peoples. These relationships demonstrate something no government program alone can create: a partnership rooted not only in shared interests, but in genuine ties between Americans and Tongans.

I'm ready to get to work if confirmed. I look forward to your questions.