

**Statement of Kevin Whitaker
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Colombia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
December 11, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be the next United States Ambassador to the Republic of Colombia.

After more than 30 years in the Foreign Service, I appreciate the privilege and responsibility it is to be considered for confirmation as ambassador. I deeply respect the role of the Senate in the work of ensuring that our nation has a foreign policy that reflects our values.

Let me recognize my wife Betsy, who had a distinguished Foreign Service career, and without whom I would not be here. My sons Stuart, Thomas, and Daniel are here as well; Stuart and Thomas are embarked on their careers, and Daniel is a third-class cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. Let me also thank President Obama and Secretary Kerry for this opportunity and their confidence in me.

My mother Evelyn and father Malvern have passed on, but their love and guidance made me who I am. My father was a career Army officer, and my mother was the daughter of immigrants; they instilled in me the notion that there is no higher calling than service to nation. In my Foreign Service career, support for democracy and for fundamental freedoms have been my guiding principles.

Colombia has come far since the late 1990s, when insurgency and narcotics trafficking tore the fabric of the nation. We have helped, including through the commitment of more than \$8.8 billion in assistance over that time – thanks to the generosity of Congress and the American people. Our support has been significant, but it is important to realize that the vast majority of the financial and human resources in this effort have come from Colombia.

Colombia is now engaged in a historic peace process intended to give the Colombian people the peace, security, and justice they have sacrificed so much to achieve. The administration strongly supports this process. Although sub-agreements have been reached, central questions remain, including about justice and victims' rights. With so much invested in Colombia's success, the United States supports this process to achieve the goals that President Santos has outlined.

If confirmed, I will underline our robust support for the peace process and the need, during in that process, to ensure that human rights are respected and rule of law is strengthened.

Colombia's progress has made it a growing market for American products. Overall two-way trade in 2012 was over \$40 billion – four times what it was a decade ago. Our FTA has opened markets and increased U.S. exports by 19 percent in just one year. As part of the agreement, we have agreed to work together to boost labor and environment protections in Colombia, and we continue robust engagement in areas of mutual concern, including providing for strong intellectual property protection and promoting labor rights through the Labor Action Plan. Our governments will continue to hold formal meetings through at least 2014 on Colombia's Labor Action Plan commitments, recognizing both advances and areas where challenges remain. Colombia has a broad free-trade agenda, and is a founding member of the Pacific Alliance, an innovative, high-standards trade pact where we are now official observers. Colombia is also striving for membership in the OECD, an ambition we support. Colombia is a constructive partner on climate change and environmental issues.

Colombia benefits from its racially diverse society. Unfortunately, the ongoing conflict and other factors have disproportionately affected members of the groups known in Colombia as black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero, who represent a large portion of Colombia's nearly five million of internally displaced people. If confirmed, I will seek to identify additional ways that the United States can help address their needs, including through our bilateral action plan.

Colombia is one of our strongest partners in the hemisphere, and indeed, in the world. Building on our outstanding cooperation in combating transnational crime and narcotics trafficking, Colombia is sharing its hard-won security expertise broadly, notably in Central America. Through a bilateral action plan on regional security cooperation, we are combining our efforts in dozens of capacity-building activities with Central American and Caribbean forces over the next two years. Colombia has consistently supported the Inter-American Human Rights System, and has worked to ensure that the OAS improves its processes and achieves its goals. And Colombia has been a voice of reason in regional political groupings.

My career and experience have prepared me for this service. I have served in leadership positions of growing responsibility over the last two decades, including as Deputy Chief of Mission in Caracas and as Deputy Executive

Secretary of the Department. I have served in senior policy positions with responsibility for Colombia since 2008, and have a firm grasp on the issues there. As a leader, I seek to empower and insist on accountability; I delegate authority, but never responsibility. I believe in the power of diplomacy, of using our influence and engagement to achieve our national security goals.

I am grateful for this opportunity, and for your time. Should the Senate confirm me, I pledge to maintain close contact with you and your staff. If confirmed, I will continue my commitment to democracy and fundamental freedoms, and I will work hard to ensure that U.S. companies in Colombia continue to have the opportunity to take advantage of all the business opportunities Colombia has to offer.

I look forward to this opportunity to advance America's interests in Colombia, and stand ready to answer any questions you might have now and in the future.