

Testimony of Michael A. McCarthy
Ambassadorial Nominee to the Republic of Liberia
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Thursday, August 6, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, it is a great honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the next U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Liberia. I am deeply grateful for the trust and confidence that the President and Secretary Pompeo have placed in me with this nomination, and I welcome the opportunity to speak with you today, albeit virtually from Pretoria, South Africa. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with the Members of this Committee – in-person or long-distance – and your staffs to promote and protect U.S. interests in Liberia.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I would like to first express my deep appreciation for the love and support of my family, friends, and colleagues who have shaped me into the person before you today. I want to especially thank my wife, Sandra Acevedo McCarthy, who is herself a Foreign Service Officer, my stepchildren Arman and Farah, and my daughters Camille and Claire.

I want to also acknowledge my deceased parents, John and Helen McCarthy, who raised seven children while serving over 28 years in the Foreign Service, and my brother Christopher, who served in the Foreign Service for 11 years before his untimely death. I would also like to thank my surviving siblings for their love and support: Dr. William J. McCarthy, Anne Percy, and John R. McCarthy, Jr.

It has been my great privilege in 34 years of public service to have worked as a Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State, as a Civil Servant in the Executive Office of the President, and as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo, West Africa. I have served in South Sudan as Deputy Chief of Mission and in other post-conflict countries in transition, and have worked on African issues for much of the past two decades, most recently as the Consul General in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Mr. Chairman, Senators, I can think of no higher honor than to represent the American people as Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Liberia, a country with which the United States shares a special bond rooted in our deep historical ties, and preserved through our commitment to democracy, human rights, economic prosperity, and greater security in the West African region. If confirmed, I will continue to strengthen all facets of our bilateral relationship and ensure that the United States remains a steadfast partner as Liberia grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2017, Liberia achieved a new milestone in its post-conflict journey when it undertook the first peaceful transition of power between two elected presidents in over 70 years. This achievement followed Liberia's success, with the assistance of the United States, in combatting the Ebola epidemic. These are tremendous achievements for a country still coping with the aftereffects of war, and they signal the promise inherent in Liberia's democratic future.

But now another infectious disease, COVID-19, threatens democratic and development gains: schools were forced to close, endangering the educational gains necessary for Liberia's next generation to succeed; an already-strained healthcare system is pushed to the brink, forcing difficult decisions between preventative and emergency care; and necessary lockdown measures have restricted hardworking Liberians from engaging in daily commerce, which could render half of the population food-insecure.

The Government of Liberia acted early to implement necessary emergency and mitigation measures. Critical investments by the United States and others in infection prevention and control measures to fight Ebola helped prepare Liberia to quickly ramp up testing, conduct thorough contact tracing, and isolate positive cases. In large part as a result of this legacy and these efforts, Liberia continues to have one of the lowest COVID-19 case-counts in the region.

Liberian public health authorities have cooperated closely with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Institutes of Health, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, and others for years. These U.S. institutions bring a depth of experience, technical assistance and on the ground partnerships that cannot be replaced by other countries' public relations-driven donations. A protracted crisis poses very real risks to Liberia's on-going development, both economically and democratically, but with continued support from the United States, Liberia's traditional partner, I believe the country will once again meet the challenge.

If confirmed, I will lead our embassy's broad and highly cooperative interagency team – which includes the aforementioned agencies, as well as the Department of State, Department of Defense, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the Peace Corps – to ensure that Liberia remains on a path to self-reliance, that ordinary Liberians see the benefits of private-sector growth and accountable government, and that the country remains the United States' most steadfast partner on the African continent.

The United States has invested more than \$2 billion in rebuilding Liberia since 2003, including over \$225 million in peacekeeping operations between 2005 and 2017. These investments in the Liberian security sector have promoted self-reliance and regional stability. Liberia has contributed military personnel to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and plans to increase its contingent this year – making it, symbolically, an exporter of security and a contributor to regional stability. Since the March 2018 departure of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Liberian law enforcement, with U.S. support, has successfully maintained internal security while also showing a consistent willingness to assist the United States in fighting terrorism, countering drug trafficking, and investigating war crimes.

These security gains are a necessary prerequisite to the country's success, but they are not sufficient, and challenges remain. A lack of funding and technical capacity, stemming from entrenched poverty and the legacy of war, continues to impede critically needed gains in health, education, and human rights. The next test will come this December, as Liberia organizes the funding and logistics necessary to hold constitutionally required senatorial elections delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Longer-term, as the situation in Liberia normalizes, I will champion efforts to increase opportunities for U.S. businesses and promote inclusive economic development focused on job creation, which is crucial to securing Liberia's growth and providing much-needed opportunities for the country's growing youth population. I look forward to working with the International Development Finance Corporation and Prosper Africa in partnership with the private sector to encourage high-quality U.S. investment, a robust alternative to state-directed financing that often leaves countries saddled with debt. The Government of Liberia is focused on job creation and infrastructure development. If confirmed, I will promote these outcomes through, among other initiatives, USAID's five-year Country Development Strategy launched in June 2019. This strategy aims to foster Liberian self-reliance by spurring robust private-sector led economic expansion through job creation, especially for women and children, promoting greater accountability in governance, and achieving real gains in the health and education of the population.

At the same time, Liberia cannot and should not backtrack from the progress it has made to increase transparency and fight corruption, integral to establishing the conditions necessary for foreign investment. Liberia's growth and development will depend on increased trade and investment, which in turn will require that U.S. and international businesses are confident they can compete openly and fairly and that any concerns will find remedy in an honest and impartial justice system.

These same concerns will inform my approach to human rights, as the justice sector, strained by the pandemic, struggles to deal with reported cases of sexual- and gender-based violence, rape, child labor, and human trafficking. These abuses must be confronted for their own sake, as well as to ensure a broader system of accountability, good governance, and rule of law.

If confirmed, I will also promote these objectives through the Millennium Challenge Corporation's five-year \$257 million Compact, which entered into force in January 2016 and will close in January 2021. The Compact has brought electricity and water to many Liberians, while also promoting transparent business practices. The Liberian government has signaled its interest in a second Compact but understands it will need to pass the Scorecard and demonstrate continued progress. If confirmed, I will work through these frameworks, and others, to support sustainable development and targeted reforms especially in the business climate to attract private investment and technical assistance and foster openness and transparency. Closer ties between the U.S. and Liberian private sectors will expand markets for goods and services and contribute to greater American and Liberian prosperity. If confirmed, I will strive to expand commercial trade and investment between the United States and Liberia.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and the other members of the Committee, and look forward to your questions.