

STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE JAMES NEALON BEFORE THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Mister Chairman, distinguished members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, it is an honor to appear today before you as the President's nominee as Ambassador to Honduras. I am deeply grateful to the President and to the Secretary of State for their trust and confidence.

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

I would like to recognize my wife, Kristin, who is here today, and our four children – Rory, Katie, Maureen, and Liam, all born while we were living overseas. We are a Foreign Service family and we have been in this together from the very beginning. This is their day as much as mine.

Mr. Chairman, the headlines do not often tell a positive story about Honduras. Our vision for Honduras is of a country that is middle class, democratic and secure. Still, this is a country that faces tremendous challenges, many of them associated with the direct and indirect effects of narcotics trafficking and organized crime structures operating throughout the country. It is a challenge to establish strong democratic institutions, establish a rule of law culture, attack impunity and corruption, reduce crime, attract investment, and ensure a prosperous future for Honduran citizens.

We share with many members on the Hill a concern about the consequences in the United States and in Honduras of slow economic growth, impunity, weak institutions, corruption, and extreme violence in Honduras. We share the view that everything is related: impunity and a lack of accountability and transparency promote a weak rule of law culture, discourage investment, and encourage illegal migration to the U.S. We are partners with you in seeking to influence this trajectory in a positive direction.

In such circumstances, some still ask if U.S. engagement in Honduras makes a difference. I believe it does and that it is in our interest to stay engaged. A Honduras with greater accountability and transparency will establish stronger rule of law institutions and be more likely to protect human rights. A Honduras with a vibrant middle class means a larger overseas market for American-made products.

A more secure and prosperous Honduras means fewer migrants trying to cross our borders. A Honduras with strong interdiction capacity means fewer drugs arriving in U.S. communities. As President Obama recently said, respect for human rights is an antidote to instability – a Honduras with strong human rights protections means enhanced security in our region.

The United States is committed to partnering with the Government of Honduras to promote prosperity, governance, and security. In order to do so, we need willing partners in Honduras who have the political will to transform their society, the capacity to seize drugs, and the commitment to arrest, prosecute and sentence criminals, and to guarantee the human rights of their own citizens.

Honduras is at a crossroads. We have seen some early signs that the Government of Honduras is ready to take important steps to improve the lives of its citizens. In May, for the first time, Honduras extradited a notorious Honduran drug trafficker to the United States, an important strike against impunity. The new government dedicated scarce resources to combat trafficking in persons and launched a signature program to bring more people into the formal economy. The government has taken steps to improve security, enhance the rule of law, and emphasize its commitment to improving human rights conditions. The president has fired corrupt police, indicted the entire board of directors of the social security institute, invited the United Nations to set up a human rights office, and set up a task force to investigate unsolved murders in a particularly conflictive area of the country, the Bajo Aguan. But there is no doubt the Government of Honduras still has a big job ahead.

Honduras's location and role in regional security make its success vital to our own national security, and it is in our interest to work with the government and civil society to improve democratic governance, the rule of law, stability, and protection of human rights. It is also important that we emphasize the value of building national consensus in support of the serious challenges the country confronts. I am fully aware of the serious doubts expressed, including in the U.S. Congress, regarding the willingness and ability of the Government of Honduras to take needed steps to improve the human rights situation. If confirmed, I commit to work tirelessly in this area.

The United States engages in Honduras to support social and economic development, improve food security, promote civil society, and give alternatives to joining gangs to at-risk youth. We have a wide variety of programs focused on increasing law enforcement and rule of law capacity and strengthening violence

prevention efforts to improve the security environment, and we recognize that these efforts are only effective and sustainable when human rights are at the center. The United States should remain Honduras' best partner because it is very much in our interest that Honduras be stable, well governed, prosperous and safe.

Mr. Chairman, I have been a deputy chief of mission at three embassies in this hemisphere. I am currently the civilian deputy to the Commander at U.S. Southern Command; in that context, my view is that the most appropriate role for the U.S. military in Honduras is to help ensure that the Honduran military is professional, under civilian direction, and can secure its own borders. I have spent most of the last 30 years working to promote democracy and human rights, enhancing law enforcement and security partnerships, and promoting U.S. exports and investment. Above all, I am proud to have spent my career working in the interests of American citizens to defend our values throughout the world.

I understand the magnitude of the challenges the United States faces in Honduras. I delegate authority, not responsibility. I believe in the power of diplomacy and of using our influence to achieve our national security goals. Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the honor of appearing before the committee today. If confirmed, I pledge to work with you and your colleagues to advance the vital interests of the United States in Honduras.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to any questions you may have, now and in the future.