

Nicole Avant  
Ambassador Designate to The Bahamas  
Statement Before the  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
July 15, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today as President Obama's nominee to serve as the Ambassador to the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. I am excited by the privilege to serve the United States and, if confirmed, I look forward to building upon some of the important initiatives put forth by my predecessors, as well as creating new initiatives and opportunities in The Bahamas.

Before going further, I'd like to acknowledge and introduce my parents, Jacqueline and Clarence Avant, my brother Alex Avant and my fiancé Ted Sarandos. I would not be here without their unwavering love, encouragement and support.

My path began in North Carolina and led me here today to continue service to our country. North Carolina is where my father was born in 1931 and where the seeds of hard work, big dreams and pure ethics were planted in my character. My father left home at the age of 14 to escape the evils of the Jim Crowe South. He never received a formal education, but because of his values, he rose to become Chairman and leader of several major companies and a trusted advisor to leaders in media, politics, business and civil rights. My mother and father instilled in me the values of hard work, service to others, respect and honor for all men and women without prejudice.

I, like many Americans, have made service a central goal of my life. I believe that my work in education, the business of entertainment, politics and philanthropy translates into the world of government and diplomacy and has prepared me to serve effectively as the United States' Ambassador to the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, should I be confirmed.

The United States and The Bahamas enjoy a close and productive bilateral partnership that embodies the key areas highlighted at the Summit of the Americas this past April: regional security, social and economic development, sustainable energy and progress protecting the environment. Our common commitment to democracy, the rule of law, shared strategic interests and geographic proximity make The Bahamas one of our closest partners in the Western Hemisphere. If confirmed, our Embassy will focus on outreach efforts to support our counter-drug and crime efforts, promote excellence in education, and encourage a stronger Bahamian role in international human rights issues.

With regard to security, the United States should maintain full support of Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos, a successful multi-national, multi-agency effort to combat international drug trafficking into and through The Bahamas. Together with the Royal Bahamian Defense Force, U.S. agencies have dismantled several major drug trafficking organizations and have interdicted over 1700 illegal migrants through joint maritime patrols. I would also work to strengthen our bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism. Through the Megaports Initiative, signed in 2004, the United States and The Bahamas have developed a capacity to detect, deter and interdict illicit shipments of nuclear and other radioactive materials through the international maritime shipping network. Building on these two partnerships, The Bahamas signed a Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) reciprocal ship boarding agreement in August of 2008,

allowing U.S. law enforcement to board Bahamian-flagged vessels anywhere in the world if they are suspected of shipping weapons of mass destruction. As the third largest ship registry in the world, The Bahamas participation is vital to the success of PSI.

The United States has engaged The Bahamas as a key member of the recently developed Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) – a multiyear, multifaceted complimentary security cooperation partnership to the Merida Initiative in Mexico and Central America. Our excellent partnership with The Bahamas in OPBAT, Megaports, and PSI, provides a foundation on which to build and strengthen intra-regional cooperation, through CBSI, to promote citizen safety and security throughout the Caribbean.

Throughout the Caribbean, the U.S. is engaging on energy security and alternative energy sources. Last year, the Embassy, the OAS and The Bahamas hosted a two-day regional conference in Nassau on sustainable energy. This event brought Caribbean leaders together with energy experts from the OAS, CARICOM and other multilateral institutions and lending organizations. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Bahamians to advance our partnership in finding and making use of clean, alternative energy.

Nearly five million U.S. citizens travel to The Bahamas each year, accounting for nearly 85% of total visitors which strengthens our close cultural ties. If confirmed, I would ensure that Embassy Nassau's Consular Section continues to provide first-rate assistance to U.S. citizens in The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands, where we have a consular jurisdiction. I would work to expand outreach programs aimed at educating both Bahamians and U.S. residents with regard to emergency planning, especially for hurricanes and migrant issues. Through the Embassy's Public Affairs Section, we would promote programs as Read to Lead, HIV/AIDS

awareness and the Breast Cancer Initiative, which focus on the importance of literacy and healthcare.

Thank you and I welcome any questions you may have.