

Statement for the Record
Barbara J. Stephenson
Ambassador-Designate to Panama
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Wednesday, April 16, 2008

It is a great honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the next American Ambassador to Panama. Mr. Chairman, throughout my career, I have appreciated the constructive role you have played in achieving our foreign policy goal—first as a young officer in Central America and later as Consul General to Belfast-- and I look forward to working with you and others members of this committee and indeed with Congress more generally if I am confirmed as Ambassador to Panama.

With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I would like to recognize my husband, Matthew Furbush. Matt served as our Community Liaison Officer during our first Foreign Service assignment--in Panama—over twenty years ago when we were newly wed, and he has served with me at every overseas post since then—six so far. Our daughter Claire, who has also earned her Foreign Service stripes—six schools on four continents by 9th grade—hopes to visit us in Panama when she is not studying at the University of Virginia. Our son Brewster, who opted to go to elementary school today, hopes to earn some more Foreign Service stripes of his own by joining us in Panama.

If confirmed as Ambassador, I will embark on my fourth tour in the region. In addition to Panama, I served in El Salvador during the final years of the civil war there and more recently in Curacao as our Consul General, heading a robust interagency counter-narcotics effort, partly in support of Plan Colombia. As I prepare to return to the region, I am struck by the dramatic, positive changes that have taken place over the years. Instead of wrestling with how to get military dictatorships to give way to democratic government, with the ravages of war, with devastating human rights abuses, we talk instead today about free trade agreements, about ensuring that the fruits of an expanding economy are shared by all citizens, about strengthening institutions vital to democracy, about bolstering our partnership to tackle hemispheric and indeed global problems together.

I look forward, if confirmed, to drawing on the deep well of support for the U.S.—over 80% of Panamanians have a favorable image of us—to pursue this positive agenda. Approval ratings this high are one of the most precious gifts any diplomat can be given. They mean that our voice counts and that Panamanians who share our enthusiasm for pursuing this positive agenda—from President Torrijos to civic action groups—welcome us as partners.

But the Trade Promotion Agreement, if approved by Congress, would also be very powerful tool. Beyond the TPA's trade benefits for both countries, the agreement directly supports our broader goals for Panama—such as encouraging transparency, and seeking to ensure that all citizens, including the nearly 40% who continue to struggle in poverty, benefit from Panama's impressive economic growth and maturing democratic institutions.

As much as some things have changed beyond recognition, other things have remained constant—such as an ambassador's fundamental obligation to look out for fellow Americans abroad. If confirmed, I assure you that protecting American citizens will be a top priority of my embassy. With over 25,000 Americans now living in Panama, this is a growing part of the embassy's work, and a task I have always taken very seriously,

Of course, geography remains destiny for Panama. As a vital crossroads for the movement of people, goods, and ideas, Panama is a “third border” for the United States. Given that two-thirds of the 14,000 ships that transit the Panama Canal each year are bound for or coming from U.S. ports, I recognize that protecting the canal and Panama's core infrastructure is critical to the homeland security of the United States. I would want to underscore here that the Panama Canal Authority, which has been in charge

of the Canal since the handover at the end of 1999, has done an impressive job of running it, and we are very pleased to see that U.S. firms are getting a fair shot at work on the ambitious multi-billion dollar Canal expansion project.

Our shared history has allowed us to forge an effective and enduring partnership to increase the benefits of Panama's unique geography while countering the threats that flow from it. If confirmed, I look forward to leading a strong interagency effort to protect our homeland by helping Panama in its efforts to push back against drug traffickers and other criminals who would exploit Panama's growing transportation hub for illegal ends. Close cooperation with Panama in law enforcement and security has already yielded many successes, including increased narcotics seizures, a more effective police force, and enhanced ability to combat money laundering. The Merida Initiative, if approved by Congress, would add considerably to our efforts both in Panama and the region.

As Panama's democratic institutions mature—and I look forward to the 2009 Presidential elections, when Panamanians will once again go to the polls to bring about a democratic transfer of power--and the country enjoys enviable economic growth—more than 11% last year—we recognize its progress and bright prospects for the future by thinking and speaking of

Panama increasingly as a *partner* in the region. We are pleased to see Panama taking a leadership role, not only regionally (such as last summer, when Panama effectively hosted the OAS General Assembly) but also globally, as exemplified by Panama's current work as a member of the UN Security Council. It would be my great honor, if confirmed, to return to Panama as ambassador to build on this partnership, particularly now, at this profoundly promising moment in Panama's history.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you again for granting me the honor of appearing before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

