

Testimony of Walter North
Ambassador-Designate to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 12, 2012

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am honored to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the Ambassador of the United States to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

I am grateful to President Obama and Secretary Clinton for their confidence and trust in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee and other interested Members of Congress.

I would not be here today if it were not for the strong support of my wife, Dr. Judy Ryon, and our family. They have always encouraged me. I deeply appreciate that.

It has been my privilege to serve our country as a career diplomat. Prior to my nomination, I served as the Director of USAID's Mission in Egypt. This followed several assignments with USAID.

Many Americans know Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu because of World War II. In my own family, my stepfather and two uncles served in that theater. I remember well their stories of the generosity of spirit of the Pacific Islanders.

The events of the Second World War created an enduring bond of friendship between the United States and the people of Melanesia. We continue to benefit from that legacy.

Today we jointly confront new challenges and opportunities in the region. Secretary Clinton has emphasized the need to listen carefully to each other and to actively cooperate in addressing the priorities identified by the Pacific Island nations. If confirmed, I will follow this guidance.

The United States has an enduring commitment to the Pacific which is reflected in the depth of our engagement.

This is richly reflected across a range of interests. For example, I am pleased that USAID's new Office for the Pacific Islands, has prioritized natural resource issues. Strong climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies are critical for sustainable, inclusive economic growth. If confirmed, I will work closely with the governments and civil societies of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu to ensure that we support economic development and effective stewardship of the region's natural resources while protecting the fundamental rights and future of those who live there.

The governments of both Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands have prioritized improvements in these areas and have moved to improve their management of their countries' natural resources. Solomon Islands' decision to

participate in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is an important first step. In Papua New Guinea, revenue streams for the government are expected to increase exponentially in large part due to the ExxonMobil-led construction of a liquefied natural gas pipeline.

Their government has already taken critical steps to ensure that these resources are better utilized, including through the creation of off-shore sovereign wealth funds that broadly comply with recommendations of the international financial institutions. As a next step, Papua New Guinea will need to accelerate movement towards full participation in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. In tandem with this progress, I am excited about the Department's Energy Governance and Capacity Initiative which is expanding Papua New Guinea's ability to manage the resource flows effectively, and in conformity with international best practices.

Realizing this goal depends on the development of strong, responsive democratic institutions that deliver for all citizens. We welcome the commitment of Papua New Guinea's government and civil society to strengthen the nation's parliament, addressing critical gaps in electoral law, and promoting national dialogue on additional ways to strengthen institutional democracy.

Secretary Clinton has eloquently and consistently reminded us all that a society can only progress if it takes full advantage of the talents of all of its

citizens. Nowhere is this more true than in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. For historical, social, and cultural reasons, women have been repeatedly marginalized in both public and professional life. Despite the well-documented problems of violence and economic marginalization, there remains cause for hope. In the recent Papua New Guinean elections, three women were elected to general seats in the nation's parliament.

During her recent visit to the Pacific Island Forum in the Cook Islands, Secretary Clinton met with leading women from the region. She underscored American support for their ongoing efforts to improve the status of women. To that end, the Secretary joined in the launch of the Rarotonga Partnership for the Advancement of Pacific Island Women. If confirmed, I will work to ensure that all of our assistance and public diplomacy programs in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu maintain their focus on advancing the status of women.

As the Pacific island country with the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection, Papua New Guinea remains a partner country for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. If confirmed, I intend to work closely with other international donors and to focus our limited funding on models that, in addition to having maximum impact on control and treatment of the disease, can be replicated by other donors and that can have cross-cutting benefits across the government's health care system.

As the most populous Pacific Island state, Papua New Guinea has recognized the unique responsibility that it has for peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. To that end, its military has been a strong partner of the United States, and we have enjoyed a cooperative security assistance relationship that has focused primarily on joint humanitarian exercises, such as the Pacific Partnership, and the training of Papua New Guinean military personnel through International Military Education and Training and participation in the Asia-Pacific Center for Strategic Studies in Honolulu. Papua New Guinean Defence Force personnel were integral participants, along with Australia and New Zealand, in the Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands. As that successful mission begins to transition security operations back to Solomon Islands government institutions, Papua New Guinea has agreed to take on new responsibilities as full participants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Its decision to deploy officers to Darfur and South Sudan in support of these operations is a laudable accomplishment and one that merits American support. If confirmed, I will work closely with the United States Pacific Command to find ways to expand our military-to-military engagement with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force in order to support its continued role in both humanitarian and international peacekeeping operations.

The United States has many shared interests and values with the Governments of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. If

confirmed, I will work closely with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu to build on our existing cooperative efforts and to explore new critical areas of partnership.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.