

Trainor Award Remarks
Ambassador (ret.) Barbara Bodine
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Georgetown University
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It is 1,344.3 miles from Baker Louisiana to New York City. About 20 hours by car via I-81, or 18 days on foot. I couldn't get a read in how long to cycle that distance, but it is a bit too far for me.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield's journey from Baker to New York took a bit longer – about four decades.

It was time well spent.

A journey of purpose, of service, of impact... a life spent working on intractable global challenges and in many of our most challenging posts, including the most demanding bureaus at State.

It was a journey of detours, exploration, and discovery.

The basic outlines of Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield's career are deceptively simple and straightforward – college, grad school, a string of Foreign Service postings starting with visa officer in Kingston, Nairobi, Nigeria, Pakistan, the UN Mission in Geneva. ... and The Gambia early on, as well as tours as senior officer in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, and in the Africa Bureau's front office.

She was ambassador to Liberia as it emerged from the horrors of civil war.

As Director General of the Foreign Service, she not only advocated for change but made change happen, dedicated to a service, her service, – foreign and civil – the attracted but also retained and rewarded the best this country has to offer.

And, for 4 years, as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs she drew attention to and shaped policies and programs that recognized the continent's multitudinous countries' achievements, capacity, and potential – and to the rich resource of a young and striving population, beyond the headlines of despair.

She left the service as part of a concerted effort to “decapitate” (her word, the right word) the senior career levels of the Department.

Linda found a temporary home at ISD, and we were delighted to welcome her as our inaugural Distinguished Resident Fellow for African Studies, as a colleague, a friend, a gifted teacher, and an always-available mentor to the many, many students who looked to her wisdom, her honesty, and her grit as they charted their own journeys.

Linda never lost sight of where she started, a path forward not bound by, but firmly grounded by home. And one of “agency” – that we all write our own chapters.

The eldest of eight children and raised in an impoverished small rural town in the Jim Crow Deep South, she was the first in her family to graduate high school.

A proud Cajun, she attended Louisiana State University where the welcome was not always warm, and the obligation to succeed, not just for herself but for those that followed, was real.

She honed her skills confronting bigotry and hatred debating a fellow student - David Duke, a future grand wizard of the KKK – at a Hyde Park-like space. There is little in New York that will impress or intimidate her. Duke later ran for office in Louisiana. He fared about as well with the Louisiana public as he did against Linda. He lost.

An aspiring lawyer, the first of many detours was to a master's in African studies at University of Wisconsin, and a turn again to the PhD program as an aspiring academic.

She was not an aspiring diplomat....not until a research trip to Liberia....a detour that changed her life on many levels – it is where she met her husband - and set her path to today.

President Biden launched his transition in November 2020 with a celebratory announcement of his foreign policy team.

With the promise that “America is Back; Diplomacy is Back,” he announced Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield as his choice to be the US representative to the United Nations, with Cabinet rank.

Biden’s decision reflected the centrality of multilateralism and global engagement as a core tool of his American diplomacy. It also reflected his respect for and validation of the value of Linda’s voice as a key policy adviser.

Her experience at the highest level of our policy decision-making process, and in the most complex multilateral fora and on the existential transnational issues we face, made her an inspired choice.

Diplomacy was back; multilateralism was back...and LTG, as she is fondly known, was back.

The journey from Baker to New York was complete.

Since that time, the Ambassador has been a clear and consistent advocate for American interests, and America’s values, in a world where those values are under threat every day outside and inside this country.

She has carried with her a lesson she learned working with Liberia’s Nobel Prize-winning President, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson - deal forthrightly with hard political issues, tempered by compassion, and always be true to yourself.

When she advocates for global engagement on the devastation of famine – she remembers a young refugee girl from Somalia – and I am quoting her now, “I made a call of desperation to the rest of the world...so we don’t ever have to watch a young child die in front of our eyes.”

When she confronts a Russian diplomat on his country's imminent invasion of Ukraine, she speaks with the power and conviction of one who has witnessed the ravages of war on a society and a people.

Genocide, war crimes, and rape are not legal abstractions, but realities she confronted throughout her assignments in Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan and as ambassador to Liberia.

She has worked the corridors of power and walked the camps of the powerless.

When she talks about the tragedy of refugees, she has been there – too many “theres” – in the camps where people have fled for their lives, and languish in hopes for their future.

Through all of this, she remains committed to the future and the possible.

Her own journey to New York has not wavered from the essential value of the person, of an understanding of the impact of policies on people.... compassion, humility, and the courage to confront the tough decisions, the hard solutions, and see the possibility for change.

Who better to be recognized today for “excellence in the conduct of diplomacy” than Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and to share with us her insights on the role of diplomacy and the struggle for human rights.