

Gumbo Diplomacy Comes to Turtle Bay

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Linda Thomas-Greenfield is set to take center stage at the United Nations.



Linda Thomas-Greenfield answers questions during her confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington on Jan. 27. Greg Nash/Getty

On April 7, 1994, Linda Thomas-Greenfield was staying at the home of a senior U.S. diplomat in Rwanda when she was confronted by an armed man who intended to kill her. It was the start of the Rwandan genocide, in which armed militias carried out the mass killing of some 800,000 ethnic Tutsi minorities and moderate Hutus over the course

of 100 days.

Thomas-Greenfield, then the U.S. regional refugee coordinator with the State Department, was faced with a life-or-death case of mistaken identity, at one point with an AK-47 assault rifle in her face.

“I was confronted by a glazed-eyed young man who had been given instructions to kill a woman by the name of Agathe. And he thought I was Agathe,” Thomas-Greenfield recalled in a 2018 TED Talk, referring to Rwanda’s then-caretaker prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who bore a striking resemblance to the American diplomat.

She waved her American passport and shouted that she was a U.S. diplomat, persuading her assailants to spare her. But she believes she survived her deadly predicament in part by making a personal connection with her presumed killer, looking him in the eye, flashing her best diplomatic smile, asking his name, and offering hers to defuse the situation. “I used the power of kindness and compassion, and I would survive,” she said.

In the end, the assassin moved on, after his gang located the moderate Hutu politician in a neighboring U.N. residence, killing

her along with a contingent of Belgian peacekeepers who were supposed to provide her with protection.

For Thomas-Greenfield, the anecdote serves as a stark example of the dangers American diplomats can face in their jobs — and a testament to the power of personal persuasion, a diplomatic skill she will take with her to Turtle Bay if confirmed in her new role as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Thomas-Greenfield's ascent to one of the most powerful diplomatic posts culminates a lifelong career in the U.S. foreign service and decades of experience on the front lines of American diplomacy in some of the world's most challenging duty stations. Her travels took her from Pakistan and Switzerland to posts across Africa and through the corridors of power in Washington.

Her nomination showcases a new approach to how America engages multilateral institutions after four years of Trumpist diplomacy at the United Nations. If confirmed by the Senate, Thomas-Greenfield will play a key role in President Joe Biden's attempts to redirect U.S. foreign policy from his predecessor's "America First" agenda and repair relations with U.S. allies that had cracked and strained under President Donald Trump.

One of her tactics? "Gumbo diplomacy"—the term she coined to advocate a folksier brand of diplomacy, based on her practice of courting foreign dignitaries over the home-cooked Cajun dish from her home state of Louisiana.

"She has a great way of being tough without being disagreeable," recalled her old

boss and former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, saying that he trusted her to deliver tough messages to foreign leaders. "I'm a 100 percent fan of what she is capable of doing. She can be absolutely as tough as you need to be."

But culinary skills aside, Thomas-Greenfield's allies in Washington concede that she has her work cut out for her in her new job to make good on Biden's pledge to restore America's credibility on the world stage.

"It's not going to be an easy one, and it wouldn't be for anyone," said Rep. Joaquin Castro, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "I don't think that we can expect her to work magic overnight. But I know that in the long term she can get the United States back to where we should be."

The U.N. ambassador post plays an outsized role in U.S. foreign policy and has traditionally been held by diplomatic heavyweights : Adlai Stevenson, future President George H.W. Bush, future Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Advisor Susan Rice, and other luminaries like Thomas Pickering and Richard Holbrooke.

Trump bucked that tradition. His first U.N. ambassador, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, warned on her first day on the job that she would "take names" of U.N. delegates that crossed Washington, withdrew the United States from U.N. bodies like the Human Rights Council, and threatened to cut funding to countries that didn't support U.S. policies. Then came Kelly Craft, the ambassador to Canada and a deep-pocketed Re-



Then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and Thomas-Greenfield, then the U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs, meet with leaders at a cathedral in Bangui, Central African Republic, on Dec. 19, 2013. Jerome Delay/AP

publican donor with little diplomatic experience.

If confirmed to her new post, as expected, Thomas-Greenfield will have a sizzling inbox. She'll have to change how America engages foreign counterparts and craft U.S. policies on complex crises around the world, from the global response to the coronavirus pandemic to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen to a new military coup in Myanmar.

"She is going to be the leading edge of the American reassertion of presence, involvement, and leadership [on the world stage]," said Thomas Shannon, who was the U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs from 2016 to 2018.

During her confirmation hearing, Thomas-Greenfield highlighted the Biden administra-

tion's plans to rejoin U.N. institutions that Trump left—the Human Rights Council and UNESCO. U.S. policymakers have often been frustrated by these bodies because they provide platforms for autocrats and tend to slam Israel. But Trump's retreat, some analysts and U.N. experts argue, has let rivals like China fill a power vacuum and carve out more influence in multilateral institutions.

China dominated Thomas-Greenfield's Senate confirmation hearing last month. She labeled China a "strategic adversary"—and warned it was attempting to remake global institutions like the United Nations in its own autocratic image. "Our leadership is needed at the table," she said, citing the importance of the United States paying down more than \$1 billion in unpaid dues to the U.N. "We know that when we cede our leadership, others jump in very quickly to fill the void," she said.

By all accounts, Thomas-Greenfield is expected to sail through confirmation with bipartisan (if not unanimous) support. But she got grilled in her hearing—precisely over China.

Several Republican senators repeatedly pressed her to explain why she delivered a relatively benign account of China's role in Africa in an October 2019 speech at Savannah State University, a historically Black university. The address—which was sponsored by the controversial China-funded Confucius Institutes, whose chapters at Savannah State and other U.S. universities have since been kicked off campus for promoting Chinese propaganda—came with a \$1,500 honorarium from the university.

“Is it the role of America’s U.N. ambassador to be cheering on the Chinese Communist Party at the expense of the developing world and at the expense of America?” asked Sen. Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican.

Thomas-Greenfield said she had not cheered on the CCP but that in hindsight it was a regrettable mistake to participate in a forum linked to the institutes and that she is committed to taking a tough line with China when needed.

“Truthfully, I wish I had not accepted that specific invitation,” she said, adding that she was committed to countering Chinese efforts to expand its influence at the U.N. and work with African countries to “push back on China’s self-interested and parasitic development goals in Africa.”

Cruz ultimately delayed the committee vote on Thomas-Greenfield’s nomination, a symbolic move that can’t derail her confirmation but could push the vote until after Trump’s second impeachment trial later this month. He made clear that he would vote against her nomination, saying he had “no confidence” she would stand up to China.

Other Republican lawmakers appeared ready to give her a pass. Sen. Jim Risch, the ranking Republican member on the committee, signaled that her career record outweighed one speech. “I can tell you that there isn’t a person sitting in this room that hasn’t given a speech that they don’t wish they had back,” Risch said.

Born in segregation-era Baker, Louisiana, Thomas-Greenfield was raised in a family of eight children with a father who could not read or write and a mother with an

eighth-grade education. Thomas-Greenfield’s story was that of millions of young Black Americans in the 1950s and ’60s struggling to make their mark in an era of Jim Crow-era segregation and violent, systemic racism. She later recalled cross burnings at the homes of her neighbors.

“The first thing to understand about Linda is she is a Southern Black woman, and what that means on the one hand is that she embodies the best of the South—the radiant warmth, a strong sense of community, eminently approachable, and a really good cook,” said Reuben Brigety, a former U.S. ambassador to the African Union and president of the University of the South in Tennessee. “Also, being a Southern Black woman, raised in the waning days of the Jim Crow South, in the deepest of the Deep South, she is used to being overlooked and underestimated.”

Her interest in Africa was first piqued in 1964, when as a 12-year-old she heard a talk by a group of Peace Corps volunteers who were headed for assignments in Somalia and Swaziland. Thomas-Greenfield didn’t achieve her initial dream of serving with the Peace Corps in Africa, but she did eventually find her way to the continent, where she devoted much of her diplomatic life, including posts in several African countries and as the top U.S. envoy for Africa during the Obama administration.

She attended a segregated high school and was among the first wave of Black students enrolled at Louisiana State University, a previously all-white school that was forced by a court order to accept non-white students.

Another student who went to LSU at the

same time was David Duke, who would go on to become grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. “He was preaching the same hatred, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, that he preached last year in Charlottesville, Virginia,” she recalled in 2018.

“When we were at LSU, there was really a significant amount of racism there,” said Leo C. Hamilton, a college friend of Thomas-Greenfield. “You had to overcome a great deal, including hostility. You had to develop an ability to work with people that weren’t the kindest people or people who didn’t want to work with you. You had to overcome that,” he said. “I would think that it helped her [in her career]. Surviving and thriving in that atmosphere requires a number of qualities that I’m sure she utilizes now.” Thomas-Greenfield laughs during her confirmation hearing in Washington on Jan. 27.

Thomas-Greenfield during her confirmation hearing in Washington on Jan. 27. Greg Nash/Getty Images

Hamilton also recalled that Thomas-Greenfield forged friendships with foreign exchange students while in college and began talking about a career in the U.S. foreign service—an institution that at the time was dominated by wealthy (and mostly white and male) graduates from elite Ivy League schools. Then, her aspirations seemed far-fetched to some of her classmates. “Wanting to work in the foreign service, at that time, seemed really foreign to the rest of us,” Hamilton said.

Following graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, where she focused her studies on local governance in Liberia, Thomas-

Greenfield taught political science at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. She joined the foreign service in 1982, entering an institution that would soon be roiled by charges of racial discrimination in its ranks. She served in posts in Jamaica, Nigeria, Gambia, Kenya, Pakistan, and Switzerland, steadily climbing through the ranks of the foreign service to senior leadership posts. Under President George W. Bush, she served a stint as U.S. ambassador to Liberia and, under Obama, as director-general of the foreign service and assistant secretary for African affairs.

Kerry, the former secretary of state, said she initially rebuffed his appeals to take the top Africa job in the State Department, telling him she enjoyed her job as director-general.

“She turned me down two times, saying that she loved what she was doing,” Kerry said. “She said, ‘I’m working with the next generation, I’m recruiting, and I love it.’”

“I’m a very persistent person, and so I didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” Kerry added. He phoned her in Georgia, where she was conducting a recruitment tour of historically Black colleges. “I’ll never forget her answer. I said, ‘Linda, I really need you,’ and she said, ‘Alright, I’ll salute,’ and that’s what she did. She saluted, and she loved the job.”

“She has actually seen the U.N. at work in Africa,” said Peter Yeo, the president of the Better World Campaign, a Washington-based U.N. advocacy group, noting that her experience in Africa makes her particularly well suited for the U.N. posting. “She gets the U.N., its strengths and weaknesses, without having to read a briefing book.”

“The hot issue in Congress is the rise of China in the U.N., and she has lived through the rise of Chinese diplomacy and foreign aid in Africa,” Yeo added.

Her appointment has been met by relief at the State Department, where she remains popular among rank-and-file diplomats, and at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. Some of the younger foreign service officers she mentored will be joining the administration and working for her again.

“After four years of crazy, she is someone who is again levelheaded,” said Jake Sherman, a former staffer at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations who currently serves as senior director of programs at the International Peace Institute.

Her experience with Africa will be relevant in an institution that conducts most of its peacekeeping and relief operations there. But the U.N. is also a key forum for big-power competition, pitting the United States against rivals like China, Iran, and Russia. Thomas-Greenfield has largely observed that competition through her work in Africa, where those powers have sought to expand their economic and security interests.

“The U.N. is also a political arena where battles are fought, and those battles have become more intense over the past decade as China, among others, has asserted its leadership,” said George Moose, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs during the Clinton administration who has worked closely with Thomas-Greenfield and has been in touch with her as she prepares for her new job. “She is going into this with eyes wide open. She knows she is going to

have to wage war in that arena.”

Thomas-Greenfield can expect to experience a “little honeymoon period” on her arrival at Turtle Bay, where “everyone will want to be on her dance card,” said Anthony Banbury, an American who previously served as a senior U.N. peacekeeping official.

But the challenge, Banbury said, is not to squander too much diplomatic energy in soliciting support for U.S. policies from countries that reflexively vote against the United States. “I’m slightly concerned that Linda, not having worked in New York, may spend a lot of energy to make nice to a bunch of countries that in the end, for reasons of U.N. politics and their own politics, just behave as they always have.”

Thomas-Greenfield has spent most of her professional life—some 35 years—in the State Department, and the culture of bipartisanship and aversion to risk runs deep in her DNA, according to friends and colleagues. She served in high-level positions under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

From 2013 to 2017, she served as the top diplomatic envoy for African affairs and during that time dealt with some of the continent’s most pressing crises, including the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, and U.S. efforts to help South Sudan stand up as the world’s newest independent nation—efforts that have largely foundered as the country is still riven in conflict and corruption despite billions of dollars in U.S. aid.

Many veteran U.S. diplomats who spoke to Foreign Policy for this story highlighted Thomas-Greenfield’s reputation as a mentor

to junior foreign service officers, particularly those of color in an institution still battling with a laggard record on diversity. She also serves as a prime example of a career diplomat who worked her way to top State Department leadership roles, when many of those roles are increasingly taken up by political allies and campaign donors for successive presidents.

In contrast to former U.S. envoys to the U.N., from Jeane Kirkpatrick to Richard Holbrooke, who sought to leave their own personal imprint on U.S. foreign policy, Thomas-Greenfield is viewed as a loyal soldier who will carry out the president's policy.

“What you can expect is that whatever the policy President Biden is putting down, that is the message she is going to carry. There will be no deviation,” said Jendayi Frazer, a Republican foreign-policy expert who served as a U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs during George W. Bush's administration. “There will be times when she will try to bring consensus, and there will be times she will fight. Her approach will reflect the spirit of President Biden.”

Thomas-Greenfield was among the first senior foreign service officers, and the most senior Black woman, to leave the State Department during a purge of seasoned career officials under Trump's first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson. After the election, Thomas-Greenfield and other senior officials holding political appointments tendered their resignations, clearing the way for Tillerson to assemble his own team. Several of her friends said she initially wanted to stay in the department after Trump was elected, and even some

Republican lawmakers encouraged Tillerson to retain her. But she ultimately decided to retire, taking a teaching position at Georgetown University.

When Mike Pompeo, Trump's second secretary of state, arrived in 2018, he reached out to Thomas-Greenfield and other former career diplomats who had been forced out of their posts for advice. Several former officials said Pompeo asked her if she would want to rejoin the department, as he vowed to restore the department's “swagger” after Tillerson's tenure. Thomas-Greenfield declined.

One of her former foreign service protégés, Desirée Cormier Smith, convinced Thomas-Greenfield to join her at the Albright Stonebridge Group, an international consultancy outfit dominated by Democratic national security hands and co-founded by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. She was hired in February 2019 to head the group's Africa divisions.

During that time, Thomas-Greenfield increasingly spoke out about the State Department's dismal record on diversity and raised alarm bells about the gutting of the career diplomatic corps under Trump, which became the target of political retaliations by Trump allies as it was dragged into the president's impeachment spotlight.

“The wreckage at the State Department runs deep,” Thomas-Greenfield and William Burns, another seasoned former diplomat whom Biden nominated to be his CIA director, wrote in a Foreign Affairs article late last year. “Career diplomats have been systematically sidelined and excluded from senior Washington jobs on an unprecedented scale. The

picture overseas is just as grim, with the record quantity of political appointees serving as ambassadors matched by their often dismal quality.”

Thomas-Greenfield subsequently made the transition to partisan politics, accepting an

invitation in August 2020 to advise the Biden campaign’s foreign-policy team by Antony Blinken, who would go on to become secretary of state. Thomas-Greenfield led Biden’s transition team for the State Department after he was elected.