

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT A NATURALIZATION CEREMONY
FOR ACTIVE-DUTY SERVICE MEMBERS

Rose Garden

10:15 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning, everybody. Thank you, Secretary Napolitano, for being here to administer the oath --for making it official. Thank you, also, for leading our efforts to achieve comprehensive immigration reform so that America keeps faith with our heritage as both a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws.

To Director Mayorkas and all the dedicated folks at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, thank you for your help to these men and women, and so many of our troops, to realize their dreams of citizenship.

We are joined by Congresswoman Susan Davis, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bill Lynn and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jim "Hoss" Cartwright.

Most of all, to America's newest citizens -- it is a great honor to serve as your Commander-in-Chief, and it is my greatest pleasure to be among the first to greet you as a "fellow American." To you and your families, welcome to the White House.

Today is your day -- a celebration of 24 inspiring men and women and the remarkable journeys that have brought you together on this beautiful spring morning to our nation's capitol. The paths that led you here began in more than a dozen countries, from Peru to Poland, from Kenya to the Philippines.

Some of you came to America as children, holding tight to your parents' hands as you arrived in a new world. Some of you came as adults, leaving everything you knew behind in pursuit of a new life. And while your stories are your own, today we celebrate the common spirit that lives within each of you -- a spirit that has renewed and strengthened America for more than two centuries.

We celebrate the love of family -- your moms and dads who were willing to say good-bye to their own families, their own countries, so they could have an opportunity to give you the

opportunity you [sic] never had. Like generations of immigrants before them, they worked hard. They scrimped and they saved. They deferred their own dreams so that you could realize yours. So today is a tribute to their sacrifices as well. And I would ask that you join me in honoring your moms and dads and the families that helped bring you to this day. (Applause.)

We celebrate the spirit of possibility -- an ethic that says if you're willing to put your shoulder to the wheel and apply your God-given talents, if you believe in yourself and you play by the rules, then there is a place for you in the United States of America -- no matter where you come from and no matter what you look like.

It's the spirit that brought a young woman from the People's Republic of China and inspired her to enlist in the United States Air Force, where she excels as a material management specialist. So today we congratulate our fellow citizen, Yu Yuan. (Applause.)

It's the spirit that brought a refugee from Ethiopia and led him to enlist in the U.S. Army because, he said, he wanted to give back to the country that "has given me the opportunity to be all that I can be." And today we congratulate Berhan Teferi. (Applause.)

We celebrate the true meaning of patriotism -- the love of a country that's so strong that these men and women were willing to risk their lives to defend our country even before they could call it their own.

It's a patriotism of a daughter of Mexico, who came to America in those first terrible days after 9/11, joined the U.S. Navy and says, "I take pride in our flag and the history that forged this great nation and the history we write day by day." So today we congratulate Perla Ramos. (Applause.)

And it's the patriotism of a young man from Papua New Guinea, who joined the United States Marine Corps and deployed to Iraq -- not once, not twice, but three times. Asked why he would choose to become an American citizen, he said simply, "I might as well. I love this country already." And so we congratulate Granger Michael. (Applause.)

The four of you can sit down. You represent not only the branch of the Armed Services that you are a part of, but also the other members who are your fellow citizens here today, and we thank you very much. We're grateful to you. (Applause.)

In short, today we celebrate the very essence of the country that we all love -- an America where so many of our forbearers came from someplace else; a society that's been

enriched by traditions and cultures from every corner of the world; a dynamic economy that's constantly renewed by the talents and energies of each new citizen; and a people who understand that citizenship is not just a collection of rights, but it's also a set of responsibilities.

Like so many others, these men and women met their responsibilities. They played by the rules. They have earned their citizenship. And so on a day like this, we are also reminded of how we must remain both a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. This includes fixing America's broken immigration system.

Over the years, many have attempted to confront this challenge, but passions are great and disagreements run deep. Yet surely we can all agree that when 11 million people in our country are living here illegally, outside the system, that's unacceptable. The American people demand and deserve a solution. And they deserve common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform grounded in the principles of responsibility and accountability.

Government has a responsibility to enforce the law and secure our borders and set clear rules and priorities for future immigration. And under Secretary Napolitano's leadership at the Department of Homeland Security, that's exactly what we're doing. We've strengthened security at our borders, ports and airports and we will continue to do so, because America's borders must be secure. That's part of what these young people here today stand for.

Businesses have a responsibility to obey the law and not undermine American workers, especially when so many Americans are out of work. Many businesses work to comply with the law every day. But for those that don't -- those that ignore the law and exploit and abuse vulnerable workers and try to gain an unfair advantage over all the businesses that do follow the law -- we will hold them accountable.

And people who are in America illegally have a responsibility -- to pay their back taxes and admit responsibility for breaking the law, pay a penalty, learn English, pass criminal background checks, and get right with the law -- or face removal -- before they can get in line and eventually earn their citizenship.

So responsibility. Accountability. Common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform. I thank Secretary Napolitano for helping to lead our efforts, both on and off Capitol Hill. And I thank Senators Schumer and Graham for working with us to forge a bipartisan consensus on a framework for moving forward, and I welcome the commitment of House and Senate Democratic

leaders to take action.

I'll continue to consult with Democrats and Republicans in Congress, and I would note that 11 current Republican Senators voted to pass immigration reform four years ago. I'm hopeful that they will join with Democrats in doing so again so we can make the progress the American people deserve.

Indeed, our failure to act responsibly at the federal level will only open the door to irresponsibility by others. And that includes, for example, the recent efforts in Arizona, which threatened to undermine basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans, as well as the trust between police and their communities that is so crucial to keeping us safe.

In fact, I've instructed members of my administration to closely monitor the situation and examine the civil rights and other implications of this legislation. But if we continue to fail to act at a federal level, we will continue to see misguided efforts opening up around the country.

As a nation, as a people, we can choose a different future -- a future that keeps faith with our history, with our heritage, and with the hope that America has always inspired in the hearts of people all over the world. For just as each of these 24 new citizens once cast their eyes upon our country from afar, so too, somewhere in the world today is a young boy or a young girl wondering if they, too, might someday share in America's promise.

In the example of these new citizens, and in the actions we take as a nation, let us offer our answer, with confidence and optimism. Yes, there is a place called America that still welcomes those "yearning to breathe free." A country where if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can pursue your dreams. A society where out of many, we are one -- "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

That's the promise of America. That is the spirit that all of you are renewing here today. We are incredibly proud of you, God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

Now, we have one other piece of business. Would Sergeant Ledum Ndaanee please come forward. There he is. How are you, sir?

SERGEANT NDAANEE: Hello, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Growing up in Nigeria, Ledum probably never imagined he'd be standing on this stage today.

SERGEANT NDAANEE: That's right, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Neither did I. (Laughter.) But thanks to the generosity of churches in Virginia, he and his parents found a home in the United States. And Ledum, who says "I always wanted to be in the military," found his calling in the United States Marine Corps.

He deployed to Iraq, and was serving his second tour when his unit was struck by an improvised explosive device. In the weeks and months that followed, he battled to recover from traumatic brain injury. At a VA medical center, with his parents at his side, he was presented a Purple Heart. And a few moments later, he was sworn in as an American citizen.

This Marine was not only determined to recover, he was determined to help others. He has been a leader and mentor to his fellow wounded warriors. In fact, I hear he's quite an athlete --

SERGEANT NDAANEE: Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: -- he agrees. (Laughter.) He will compete next month in the first Warrior Games at the U.S. Olympic training center in Colorado.

So for his distinguished service to country, and for inspiring us all with his example of what citizenship truly means, I am proud to join the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in presenting this recognition -- the "Outstanding American by Choice" award -- to Sergeant Ledum Ndaanee. Do we have the award? (Applause.)

(The award is presented.)

With that, I'd ask Sergeant Ndaanee to conclude our ceremony by leading us all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

(The Pledge of Allegiance is recited.)

Thank you, everybody. (Applause.)

END

10:27 A.M. EDT