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Barack Obama

Naturalization Ceremony Speech at the National Archives

delivered 15 December 2015, Washington, D.C.



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Well, good morning, everybody. Thank you Deputy Secretary Mayorkas, Judge Roberts, and Director Rodriguez. Thank you to our Archivist, David Ferriero, and everyone at the National Archives for hosting us here today in this spectacular setting.

And to my fellow Americans, our newest citizens -- I'm so excited. You are men and women from more than 25 countries, from Brazil to Uganda, from Iraq to the Philippines. You may come from teeming cities or rural villages. You don't look alike. You don't worship the same way. But here, surrounded by the very documents whose values bind us together as one people, you've raised your hand and sworn a sacred oath. I'm proud to be among the first to greet you as "my fellow Americans."

What a remarkable journey all of you have made. And as of today, your story is forever woven into the larger story of this nation. In the brief time that we have together, I want to share that story with you.



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Because even as you've put in the work required to become a citizen, you still have a demanding and rewarding task ahead of you -- and that is the hard work of active citizenship. You have rights and you have responsibilities. And now you have to help us write the next great chapter in America's story.

Just about every nation in the world, to some extent, admits immigrants. But there's something unique about America. We don't simply welcome new immigrants, we don't simply welcome new arrivals -- we are born of immigrants. That is who we are. Immigration is our origin story. And for more than two centuries, it's remained at the core of our national character; it's our oldest tradition. It's who we are. It's part of what makes us exceptional.

After all, unless your family is Native American, one of the first Americans, our families -- all of our families -- come from someplace else. The first refugees were the Pilgrims themselves -- fleeing religious persecution, crossing the stormy Atlantic to reach a new world where they might live and pray freely. Eight signers of the Declaration of Independence were immigrants. And in those first decades after independence, English, German, and Scottish immigrants came over, huddled on creaky ships, seeking what Thomas Paine called "asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty..."

Down through the decades, Irish Catholics fleeing hunger, Italians fleeing poverty filled up our cities, rolled up their sleeves, built America. Chinese laborers jammed in steerage under the decks of steamships, making their way to California to build the Central Pacific Railroad that would transform the West -- and our nation. Wave after wave of men, women, and children -- from the Middle East and the Mediterranean, from Asia and Africa -- poured into Ellis Island, or Angel Island, their trunks bursting with their most cherished possessions -- maybe a photograph of the family they left behind, a family Bible, or a Torah, or a Koran. A bag in one hand, maybe a child in the other, standing for hours in long lines. New York and cities across America were transformed into a sort of global fashion show. You had Dutch lace caps and the North African fezzes, stodgy tweed suits and colorful Caribbean dresses.

And perhaps, like some of you, these new arrivals might have had some moments of doubt, wondering if they had made a mistake in leaving everything and everyone they ever knew behind. So life in America was not always easy. It wasn't always easy for new immigrants. Certainly it wasn't easy for those of African heritage who had not come here voluntarily, and yet in their own way were immigrants themselves.



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There was discrimination and hardship and poverty. But, like you, they no doubt found inspiration in all those who had come before them. And they were able to muster faith that, here in America, they might build a better life and give their children something more.

Just as so many have come here in search of a dream, others sought shelter from nightmares. Survivors of the Holocaust. Soviet Refuseniks. Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. Iraqis and Afghans fleeing war. Mexicans, Cubans, Iranians leaving behind deadly revolutions. Central American teenagers running from gang violence. The Lost Boys of Sudan escaping civil war. They're people like Fulbert Florent Akoula from the Republic of Congo, who was granted asylum when his family was threatened by political violence. And today, Fulbert is here, a proud American.

We can never say it often or loudly enough: Immigrants and refugees revitalize and renew America. Immigrants like you are more likely to start your own business. Many of the Fortune 500 companies in this country were founded by immigrants or their children. Many of the tech startups in Silicon Valley have at least one immigrant founder.

Immigrants are the teachers who inspire our children, and they're the doctors who keep us healthy. They're the engineers who design our skylines, and the artists and the entertainers who touch our hearts. Immigrants are soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen who protect us, often risking their lives for an America that isn't even their own yet. As an Iraqi, Muhanned Ibrahim Al Naib was the target of death threats for working with American forces. He stood by his American comrades, and came to the U.S. as a refugee. And today, we stand by him. And we are proud to welcome Muhanned as a citizen of the country that he already helped to defend.

We celebrate this history, this heritage, as an immigrant nation. And we are strong enough to acknowledge, as painful as it may be, that we haven't always lived up to our own ideals. We haven't always lived up to these documents.

From the start, Africans were brought here in chains against their will, and then toiled under the whip. They also built America. A century ago, New York City shops displayed those signs, "No Irish Need Apply." Catholics were targeted, their loyalty questioned -- so much so that as recently as the 1950s and '60s, when JFK had to run, he had to convince people that his allegiance wasn't primarily to the Pope.



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Chinese immigrants faced persecution and vicious stereotypes, and were, for a time, even banned from entering America. During World War II, German and Italian residents were detained, and in one of the darkest chapters in our history, Japanese immigrants and even Japanese American citizens were forced from their homes and imprisoned in camps. We succumbed to fear. We betrayed not only our fellow Americans, but our deepest values. We betrayed these documents. It's happened before.

And the biggest irony of course was -- is that those who betrayed these values were themselves the children of immigrants. How quickly we forget. One generation passes, two generation passes, and suddenly we don't remember where we came from. And we suggest that somehow there is "us" and there is "them," not remembering we used to be "them."

On days like today, we need to resolve never to repeat mistakes like that again. We must resolve to always speak out against hatred and bigotry in all of its forms -- whether taunts against the child of an immigrant farmworker or threats against a Muslim shopkeeper. We are Americans. Standing up for each other is what the values enshrined in the documents in this room compels us to do -- especially when it's hard. Especially when it's not convenient.

That's when it counts. That's when it matters -- not when things are easy, but when things are hard.

The truth is, being an American is hard. Being part of a democratic government is hard.

Being a citizen is hard. It is a challenge. It's supposed to be. There's no respite from our ideals. All of us are called to live up to our expectations for ourselves -- not just when it's convenient, but when it's inconvenient. When it's tough. When we're afraid. The tension throughout our history between welcoming or rejecting the stranger, it's about more than just immigration. It's about the meaning of America, what kind of country do we want to be. It's about the capacity of each generation to honor the creed as old as our founding: "E Pluribus Unum" -- that out of many, we are one.

Scripture tells us, "For we are strangers before you, and sojourners, as were all our fathers."

"We are strangers before you." In the Mexican immigrant today, we see the Catholic immigrant of a century ago. In the Syrian seeking refuge today, we should see the Jewish refugee of World War II.



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In these new Americans, we see our own American stories -- our parents, our grandparents, our aunts, our uncles, our cousins who packed up what they could and scraped together what they had. And their paperwork wasn't always in order. And they set out for a place that was more than just a piece of land, but an idea.

America: A place where we can be a part of something bigger. A place where we can contribute our talents and fulfill our ambitions and secure new opportunity for ourselves and for others. A place where we can retain pride in our heritage, but where we recognize that we have a common creed, a loyalty to these documents, a loyalty to our democracy; where we can criticize our government, but understand that we love it; where we agree to live together even when we don't agree with each other; where we work through the democratic process, and not through violence or sectarianism to resolve disputes; where we live side by side as neighbors; and where our children know themselves to be a part of this nation, no longer strangers, but the bedrock of this nation, the essence of this nation.

And that's why today is not the final step in your journey. More than 60 years ago, at a ceremony like this one, Senator John F. Kennedy said, "No form of government requires more of its citizens than does the American democracy." Our system of self-government depends on ordinary citizens doing the hard, frustrating but always essential work of citizenship -- of being informed. Of understanding that the government isn't some distant thing, but is you. Of speaking out when something is not right. Of helping fellow citizens when they need a hand. Of coming together to shape our country's course.

And that work gives purpose to every generation. It belongs to me. It belongs to the judge. It belongs to you. It belongs to you, all of us, as citizens. To follow our laws, yes, but also to engage with your communities and to speak up for what you believe in. And to vote -- to not only exercise the rights that are now yours, but to stand up for the rights of others.

Birtukan Gudeya is here from Ethiopia. She said, "The joy of being an American is the joy of freedom and opportunity. We have been handed a work in progress, one that can evolve for the good of all Americans." I couldn't have said it better.



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That is what makes America great -- not just the words on these founding documents, as precious and valuable as they are, but the progress that they've inspired. If you ever wonder whether America is big enough to hold multitudes, strong enough to withstand the forces of change, brave enough to live up to our ideals even in times of trial, then look to the generations of ordinary citizens who have proven again and again that we are worthy of that.

That's our great inheritance -- what ordinary people have done to build this country and make these words live. And it's our generation's task to follow their example in this journey -- to keep building an America where no matter who we are or what we look like, or who we love or what we believe, we can make of our lives what we will.

You will not and should not forget your history and your past. That adds to the richness of American life. But you are now American. You've got obligations as citizens. And I'm absolutely confident you will meet them. You'll set a good example for all of us, because you know how precious this thing is. It's not something to take for granted. It's something to cherish and to fight for.

Thank you. May god bless you. May god bless the United States of America.