



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

From Sea to Shining Sea: Reflections on the Meaning and Significance of U.S. Citizenship

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Good morning.

Thank you Chief Judge Howell for that introduction.

And, thank you for inviting me to be with you today.

First, congratulations to all of you on reaching this final step in the naturalization process. Becoming a U.S. citizen is a momentous occasion and one that you will remember for the rest of your lives. I can personally attest to that.

The federal courthouse in Washington, D.C. is a wonderful setting to discuss the joy and honor of U.S. citizenship. After all, the courts are an integral part of the independent judiciary – and the crown jewel of our constitutional republic. It is, in my view, what makes our country unique.

In the United States, citizenship is the vehicle by which the Constitution's fundamental rights flow to the people. One cannot fully grasp the significance of citizenship or the United States without first having a deep appreciation for the Constitution itself.

Drafted in 1787 and ratified in 1789, the Constitution begins with three important words: “[w]e the people.” Those words boldly signify that our Republic was formed on the idea that power is vested principally in the people.

As President Ronald Reagan once said, “Almost all the worlds’ constitutions are documents in which governments tell the people what their privileges are. Our Constitution is a document in which We the People tell the government what it is allowed to do. We the People are free.”

The Constitution is the supreme law of the United States. It establishes the framework of our government and confers both rights and duties to those who are bound by it. It also enshrines our core values, among them self-government and individual liberty.

At its core, U.S. citizenship means a fidelity to the Constitution – a conscious, solemn commitment to America's enduring principles and ideals. That is why the Oath of Allegiance, which all of you will recite today, calls upon you to “support and defend the Constitution and [the] laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic” and to “bear true faith and allegiance to the same.”

As former Attorney General John Ashcroft once said, “How best to nurture and defend liberty is the unending challenge of any self-governing people.” In the United States, we know that freedom, nurtured and protected through the rule of law, has made America exceptional.

The Constitution was designed to protect the rule of law – the principle that all persons, institutions, and entities are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated.

The idea dates back to the fourth century BC, when the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that “[i]t is more proper that law should govern than any one of the citizens.” While rule of law principles have developed over many centuries, today they are fundamental to the preservation of liberty.

As Rod Rosenstein, the Deputy Attorney General of the United States, recently remarked, “The rule of law is indispensable to a thriving and vibrant society. It shields citizens from government overreach. It allows businesses to invest with confidence. It gives innovators protection for their discoveries. It keeps people safe from dangerous criminals. And it allows us to resolve differences peacefully through reason and logic.”

Let me now describe what citizenship and the promise of America have meant to me.

First, I want to share something about myself. I was speaking from experience when I said that becoming a U.S. citizen is a momentous occasion that you will remember for the rest of your lives. I became a citizen in 1992 when I was in law school here in Washington, D.C.

I was born in Tehran, Iran. Although anti-Semitism was a fact of life for my Iranian-Jewish family, my life changed forever when the Shah was deposed and a hostile revolution caused my family to flee.

We began anew in Los Angeles in 1979. As many of you know, Los Angeles is a diverse place that is home to people of different religions, ethnicities, nationalities, and ideologies. Los Angeles will always be home and I am forever grateful to the community that embraced me and my family. I still visit my elementary school and take my kids to that small town where I grew up.

Soon after arriving in the United States, I learned English and my family embraced American life. Some of my fondest memories of our early years in the United States include working at my dad’s gas station. I pumped gas, changed oil, tuned up cars, and sold tires.

Those experiences taught me a lot more than just how to work on a car.

My father, and others in my family who worked hard to feed their families, embodied the American entrepreneurial spirit and I am grateful that my father made the American dream possible for myself and my sisters. He taught me the value of hard work, resilience, and dedication. He

went through much hardship, but persevered. Like many of you, I strive to teach my three children these lessons each day.

My story is not unique. What is unique is this country. For as long as the United States has existed, hard-working immigrants have helped shape American life. Albert Einstein, Charlize Theron, Hakeem Olajuwon, Eddie Van Halen, Wolfgang Puck, Salma Hayek, and Liam Neeson are all immigrants who achieved the American dream and, in different ways, made life more enjoyable for us.

Another thing they have in common is they all became naturalized U.S. citizens, just as you are doing today.

My life experience reaffirms that we live in the greatest country in the world. One year and one day ago, I was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to serve as the Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust at the U.S. Department of Justice. The same U.S. Senate where I had the great honor to work and become friends with the Chief Judge of this Court, the Honorable Beryl Howell.

Each day, I have the privilege of going to work at the Main Justice Building. It is the headquarters of the Justice Department on Pennsylvania Avenue and sits across from the National Archives, where you can see the original Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

The Main Justice Building is a place where American history, honor, and duty are actually and figuratively preserved for all of time. The desk of former Attorney General Bobby Kennedy sits in the Antitrust Division's suite. There are portraits of each Attorney General hanging in the hallways. Our walls are covered in beautiful painted murals depicting scenes of law and justice. I walk the halls of the Justice Department with the knowledge that great prosecutors, including some of my own legal heroes, such as Robert Jackson, once walked the same hallowed halls.

The talented men and women of the Antitrust Division fight for free markets and promote sound antitrust policy through vigorous law enforcement and advocacy. U.S. competition policy is premised on the idea that the antitrust laws, when vigorously and properly enforced, are the greatest protectors of the free market. Those are the same free markets that many of you have fled your countries to find to help achieve an entrepreneurial dream or an improved lifestyle.

We don't pick winners and losers at the Antitrust Division, but protect competition on the merits and enforce the laws equally. Hard nose competition ensures lower prices, increased innovation, higher quality goods and services, and improved opportunities for entrepreneurs to succeed.

Free markets and economic opportunity are significant reasons why the United States is able to attract the best, brightest, and most motivated people, like you, from around the world. Americans uniquely have the freedom to choose what they want to be.

In some countries, a person's future is determined by the class in which he or she was born or the inefficiency of a planned central economy. In the United States, we are committed to liberty. We believe you can be whatever you want and that your character, work ethic, and integrity are more important than the place where you were born. The great trustbuster and former U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt once said, "We should keep steadily before our minds that Americanism is a question of principle, of purpose, of idealism, of character; that it is not a matter of birthplace, or creed, or line of descent."

My life story reflects the hope and promise of this country and that the American dream is alive and well. There are few other places in the world where an immigrant fleeing violent regime change and religious intolerance could grow up to work in the White House, the U.S. Senate, and the Justice Department.

The founding of America was a bold and improbable experiment. It reflects the hope and promise of creating a government by ordinary people that affords its citizens liberty, democracy, opportunity, and equality. As James Madison noted, "The happy Union of these States is a wonder; their Constitution a miracle; their example the hope of Liberty throughout the world."

Many of you left your homes in order to pursue a better life for yourselves and for your families. Some of you may have fled violence, war, or instability and you may have been subjected to persecution for who you are, how you look, or what you believe.

In a few minutes, each of you will take the Oath of Allegiance and complete the long legal process of becoming a U.S. citizen. In so doing, you will become part of the great American enterprise. Your citizenship makes you a part owner, a shareholder.

Enjoy the rights and benefits of citizenship, but also recognize the responsibilities that come with it. It is our moral imperative to make this country better than we found it – not just for ourselves or our families but for our neighbors and future generations to come. Participate actively in our democracy. Grow your ideas. Start businesses. Get involved in your communities. Join the ranks of the brave soldiers who protect our country every day. Care deeply and passionately about the American people.

Above all, remember your obligation to keep the Republic, guard the Constitution, and preserve the rule of law.

In closing, let me just say what a privilege it is to stand before all of you today and be a part of this important occasion.

I want to congratulate you and your families, and all of the American citizens in the audience who are so fortunate to welcome you as citizens of this great country. I thank you and I thank her Honor, the Chief Judge, for this privilege.