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"Civic Integration - Citizenship After 9/11"

Good afternoon. Thank you, Bob, for that warm introduction. I am pleased to be here and speak to one of America's greatest privileges, Citizenship.

More specifically, I am here to talk about how Citizenship has changed since 9/11, and what USCIS is doing to refresh this American value.

An obvious place to start is by asking, what is Citizenship? Citizenship is, by definition, a condition of allegiance to, and participation in, a governmental jurisdiction. It means, for a collective order, a pledge of loyalty, commitment to actively participate in civics and community, and willingness to serve when and where called upon.

But, that is academic. The practical is- we each have a unique opinion of what it means to be a citizen in the greatest country in the world. And, where else but America could there be such freedom to differ on the one thing that we have in common.

America was built upon the principles of freedom, democracy and certain unalienable rights. The dreams and determination of immigrants, in whose footsteps I followed, enriched this land- socially, culturally and economically.

And, that record of contribution continues...as we speak, immigrant soldiers are fighting for freedom to triumph over terror. Their willingness to give the ultimate sacrifice echoes the words, as engraved on the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your
teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed,
to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Make no mistake; we are today, as much a nation of immigrants as we have ever been. America's founding fathers knew this would be. George Washington, in his farewell address, noted "Citizens by birth or choice of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections."

Washington's observations hold true. Citizenship begins within the individual but is nurtured by the country.

That is my task before you. The fateful day of September 11, 2001 emboldened our nation and united us through patriotism.

We each remember, with vivid clarity and overwhelming emotion, where we were and what we saw. We continue to try and make sense out of incomprehensible acts. And, we each, in our own way, say...never again.

The Nation's resolve led to the creation of the new Department of Homeland Security, the dissolution of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, a fundamental transformation in the delivery of immigration

services and an uncompromising commitment to the integrity of our immigration system. It also reinvigorated Citizenship, and its sinews have never been stronger.

The Administration and Congress called for, within the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the creation of an Office of Citizenship. This pioneering office is charged with promoting public awareness of the rights and responsibilities of this treasured value.

To put our ambitious agenda in context- by a show of hands, how many of you can trace your immigrant roots? In the private sector, I would call this redundant market research. Because, we all have an immigrant lineage of one form or another. That gives you insight into the size of our customer base...everyone, citizen and non-citizen alike.

Now, some easier questions; not to show your hands, but ponder...how many of you have a driver's license? How many of you got your license at the earliest possible age? Or, for the parents among us, how many of you recall the experience of your children earning a license?

In our country a license is a rite of passage, because to drive constitutes freedom to go, within reason, where you want, when you want. It also is an indisputable privilege, and one that is too often taken for granted.

Like a license, you have to earn Citizenship – a very different rite of passage – ...though the reward is beyond compare. And, like driver's education, the responsibilities that accompany the privilege of Citizenship do not culminate with a passing score and certificate. Rather, they multiply in number and scope.

The Office of Citizenship, within U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, is – loosely speaking – like a driving instruction program – coaching this rite of passage, for a nation-wide rediscovery of American Citizenship.

We are trying to take the concept of assimilation a step further, to what I call Civic Integration. The difference between the two- is choice...more specifically, choice of allegiance.

America is as diverse as it is large. Today, a common denominator of our citizenry in a post-9/11 world is...allegiance. Quite simply, we are one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Assimilation implies that government defines for the immigrant what it means to be American. We can, and should...do everything, but

Defining what it means to be American is as much an individual right as our freedom to practice the faith, the politics and profession of one's choosing.

Government educates, facilitates and empowers potential new citizens to realize their respective American dreams. In the end, however, the decision to forge a personal and patriotic allegiance is up to the individual.

I want newly naturalized citizens to pick up the torch of American Citizenship and carry it for their children's generation. That is Civic Integration.

The Office of Citizenship will stress accountability and equip to that end.

I am particularly pleased with our Immigrant Orientation Program, a pilot to provide legal immigrants with informational packets upon their initial arrival.

These packets will educate and inform on the expectations for Civic Integration as well as more clearly define the naturalization process.

At the grass-roots level, we will partner with groups like USA Freedom Corps to match new immigrants with community volunteers. And, we will soon have 30 Outreach Officers stationed in 17 strategic cities throughout the country, to carry out the President's charge that America continue to be "a nation that welcomes immigrants with open arms, not endless lines."

Any teacher will tell you that a proven barometer of knowledge is a test. So, we are looking at how we test potential new citizens.

We have convened a select and distinguished committee of university professors to identify the questions that best capture America and recommend as to how these questions should be framed. They began with English, and a corresponding study guide, and will turn next to Civics and History.

I cannot emphasize enough the significance of this undertaking. The current naturalization test is somewhat arbitrary. A candidate in San Francisco will, in all likelihood, not be asked the same questions as a candidate taking same exam on the same day in Boston. Inherently, this is now wrong; however, I think that we can do better!

In the current structure, an examiner will randomly select from a compilation of questions. This forces a candidate to memorize some 100 responses, instead of learning, grasping and retaining the answers to a strategic series of questions.

It comes down to meaning and substance. To compliment, we are making the naturalization ceremony more uniformly meaningful.

Because of the freedoms and economic opportunities that only America can provide, applications for naturalization have remained strong since 9/11. Last year, we welcomed more than 640,000 newly naturalized citizens to the American family.

Somewhere in America, right now, there is an administrative naturalization ceremony under way. Tomorrow, in Seattle, more than 100 service men and women, returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, will take advantage of the President's Executive Order to expedite military naturalizations for those immigrant soldiers who bravely serve in the war against terror.

And, next week, I will join adoptive families in welcoming children in Miami to the table of America Citizenship.

Of course, the Oath of Allegiance is the most patriotic component to any naturalization ceremony.

And, having had the unique privilege of reciting the Oath as an immigrant, and now administering it as Director, I want to see it become even more so.

The Oath should not be altered in substance and solemnity, but it should be more crisp, fervent and meaningful – in keeping with the times. Renouncing and abjuring allegiances and fidelity to princes and potentates is confusing.

When a candidate raises his or her right hand to take this pledge, there is no guarantee that a new citizen will be a good citizen. However, we take an even bigger risk by using archaic language and convoluted grammar.

By choosing to become a Citizen, immigrants enter into a covenant with the United States. This covenant reserves the call to serve and bear arms, and demands loyalty to the Constitution and our laws.

One of the reasons the Department of Homeland Security was created is to prevent the wrong applicant from receiving an immigration benefit. Our comprehensive background checks, and effective risk management, sorts out the bad apples. Our initiatives for dramatically refreshing the citizenship process,

including the Oath, will cultivate the good ones, and in so doing, we aim to sponsor new American patriots.

About a month ago, I was on CNN Moneyline with Lou Dobbs. The segment was billed by CNN as "The Great American Give Away." My message was that we give nothing away! In fact, we add value by making America more secure, preserving America's legacy of immigration, and celebrating America's ultimate privilege- Citizenship.

I regret that I will not be able to stay for the panel discussion. I have a commitment with my boss, Secretary Tom Ridge, on the Hill. I leave you in the capable hands of Alfonso Aguilar, our newly appointed Chief of the Office of Citizenship.

Before I depart, however, I remind you of what President Theodore Roosevelt, once noted, "The first requisite of a good citizen in this republic of ours is that he shall be able and willing to pull his weight."

My fellow citizens, one of the ways in which we are pulling our weight is by debating an issue as important as American Citizenship.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless America.