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The White House
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

July 04, 2012

Remarks by the President at Naturalization Ceremony

East Room

10:58 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.) Good morning, everybody.

AUDIENCE: Good morning, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Secretary Napolitano, Director Mayorkas, distinguished guests, family and friends -- welcome to the White House. Happy Fourth of July. What a perfect way to celebrate America's birthday -- the world's oldest democracy, with some of our newest citizens.

I have to tell you, just personally, this is one of my favorite things to do. It brings me great joy and inspiration because it reminds us that we are a country that is bound together not simply by ethnicity or bloodlines, but by fidelity to a set of ideas. And as members of our military, you raised your hand and took an oath of service. It is an honor for me to serve as your Commander-in-Chief. Today, you raised your hand and have taken an oath of citizenship. And I could not be prouder to be among the first to greet you as "my fellow Americans."

Looking back, it was an act of extraordinary audacity -- a few dozen delegates, in that hall in Philadelphia, daring to defy the mightiest empire in the world, declaring "that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States."

Two hundred and thirty-six years later, we marvel at America's story. From a string of 13 colonies to 50 states from sea to shining sea. From a fragile experiment in democracy to a beacon of freedom that still lights the world. From a society of farmers and merchants to the largest, most dynamic economy in the world. From a ragtag army of militias and regulars to you -- the finest military that the world has ever known. From a population of some 3 million -- free and slave -- to more than 300 million Americans of every color and every creed.

With this ceremony today -- and ceremonies like it across our country -- we affirm another truth: Our American journey, our success, would simply not be possible without the generations of immigrants who have come to our shores from every corner of the globe. We say it so often, we sometimes forget what it means -- we are a nation of immigrants. Unless you are one of the first Americans, a Native American, we are all descended from folks who came from someplace else -- whether they arrived on the Mayflower or on a slave ship, whether they came through Ellis Island or crossed the Rio Grande.

Immigrants signed their names to our Declaration and helped win our independence. Immigrants helped lay the railroads and build our cities, calloused hand by calloused hand. Immigrants took up arms to preserve our union, to defeat fascism, and to win a Cold War. Immigrants and their descendants helped pioneer new industries and fuel our Information Age, from Google to the iPhone. So the story of immigrants in America isn't a story of "them," it's a story of "us." It's who we are. And now, all of you get to write the next chapter.

Each of you have traveled your own path to this moment -- from Cameroon and the Philippines, Russia and Palau and places in between. Some of you came here as children, brought by parents who dreamed of giving you the opportunities that they had never had. Others of you came as adults, finding your way through a new country and a new culture and a new language.

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All of you did something profound: You chose to serve. You put on the uniform of a country that was not yet fully your own. In a time of war, some of you deployed into harm's way. You displayed the values that we celebrate every Fourth of July -- duty, responsibility, and patriotism.

We salute a husband and father, originally from Mexico, now a United States Marine, joined today by his wife Silvia and daughter Juliett. Becoming a citizen, he says, is "another step in the right direction for my family." So today we congratulate Francisco Ballesteros De La Rosa. Where's Francisco? (Applause.)

We salute a young woman from El Salvador, who came here when she was just six, grew up in America, who says she "always had a desire to serve" and who dreamed of becoming -- who dreams of becoming an Army medic. So we congratulate Luisa Childers. Luisa. (Applause.)

We salute a young man from Nigeria who came here as a child. "I left Nigeria," he says, "with the dream that we all have a destiny in life and we are all born with the resources to make a difference." We are confident he will make a difference. We congratulate Oluwatosin Akinduro. (Applause.)

We salute a young man from Bolivia, who came to America, enlisted in our military and has volunteered to help care for our veterans. He's becoming a citizen, he says, to be a "part of the freedom that everybody is looking for." And so we congratulate Javier Beltran. (Applause.)

It has taken these men and women -- these Americans -- years, even decades, to realize their dream. And this, too, reminds us of a lesson of the Fourth. On that July day, our Founders declared their independence. But they only declared it; it would take another seven years to win the war. Fifteen years to forge a Constitution and a Bill of Rights. Nearly 90 years, and a great Civil War, to abolish slavery. Nearly 150 years for women to win the right to vote. Nearly 190 years to enshrine voting rights. And even now, we're still perfecting our union, still extending the promise of America.

That includes making sure the American dream endures for all those -- like these men and women -- who are willing to work hard, play by the rules and meet their responsibilities. For just as we remain a nation of laws, we have to remain a nation of immigrants. And that's why, as another step forward, we're lifting the shadow of deportation from serving -- from deserving young people who were brought to this country as children. It's why we still need a DREAM Act -- to keep talented young people who want to contribute to our society and serve our country. It's why we need -- why America's success demands -- comprehensive immigration reform.

Because the lesson of these 236 years is clear -- immigration makes America stronger. Immigration makes us more prosperous. And immigration positions America to lead in the 21st century. And these young men and women are testaments to that. No other nation in the world welcomes so many new arrivals. No other nation constantly renews itself, refreshes itself with the hopes, and the drive, and the optimism, and the dynamism of each new generation of immigrants. You are all one of the reasons that America is exceptional. You're one of the reasons why, even after two centuries, America is always young, always looking to the future, always confident that our greatest days are still to come.

So, to all of you, I want to wish you the happiest Fourth of July. God bless you all. God bless our men and women in uniform and your families. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

And with that, I want you to join me in welcoming onto the stage one of America's newest citizens. Born in Guatemala, he enlisted in the Marine Corps, served with honor in Afghanistan. And I know he's especially proud because, in a few days, his father Walter -- who's also here today -- will become a naturalized American citizen as well. Where's Walter? There he is over there. (Laughter.) Good to see you, Walter. (Applause.) Please welcome, Lance Corporal Byron Acevedo to lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Right here.

MR. ACEVEDO: I'm nervous. (Laughter.)

(The Pledge of Allegiance is said.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, everybody. Have a great Fourth of July. Congratulations to our newest citizens. Yay! (Applause.)

END
11:09 A.M. EDT

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