

**Remarks at a Naturalization Ceremony for Active Duty Servicemembers and Civilians**

*March 25, 2013*

Thank you so much. Well, good morning, everybody. Secretary Napolitano, thank you for administering the oath and making it official. Director Mayorkas, distinguished guests, family and friends, it is a great pleasure to have you here at the White House. And it is an honor to be among the first to greet some of my fellow citizens of the United States.

Today, here in the people's house—a house designed by an Irish immigrant—we welcome 28 men and women, immigrants themselves, who from this day forward have earned the precious right to call this country home.

And I know this is an incredibly special moment for you and your families, but I have to say, it's a special moment for the rest of us as well. Because as we look out across this room, we're reminded that what makes somebody American isn't just their bloodlines, it's not just an accident of birth. It's a fidelity to our founding principles, a faith in the idea that anyone, anywhere, can write the next great chapter in this American story.

That's the promise of America. And today we know it's alive and well in each and every one of you.

At first glance, of course, it would be easy to define this group by their differences. They all hail from different corners of the world—from Nigeria to Nicaragua, from the Philippines to Peru. They arrived here in different ways. Some of you came here as children, carried by parents who wished for a life that they had never had. Others came as adults, leaving behind everything you knew to seek a new life. But what binds you together—what binds us all together—is something more meaningful than anything of that. A love for this country and all that it represents—that's what unites each and every one of you.

For Nikita Kirichenko—there's Nikita right here—that love runs so deep it led him to enlist in our military. Nikita came here at the age of 11 from Ukraine. His mother saw America as the one place on Earth where her son could do anything he wanted. And a few years ago, Nikita decided that he wanted to join the Air Force so that, in his words, "I could give back to a country that took me in and gave me a better life." Thank you, Nikita. Today, we proudly salute him not just as a member of our military but also as a citizen of our country.

Today, we salute Elrina Brits. Where did Elrina go? There she is. Elrina was born in South Africa, came here as a child, grew up in Washington State. When Elrina decided to join the Navy, somebody told her that she wouldn't be able to cut it. But even though she wasn't yet American on paper, she had that American quality of being defiant when somebody says you can't do something. [*Laughter*] So she proved them wrong. She deployed twice to the Middle East, once to Haiti, showcasing another quintessentially American impulse, and that's helping others in need. And as a new citizen, Elrina hopes to serve her country in a new way — as a police officer. So, congratulations, Elrina.

Elrina, Nikita, every member of the military with us have shown incredible patriotism; a willingness to risk their lives in defense of a nation that was not yet their own. And that's a remarkable act. And it made each of them one of us. It made each of them in some ways

American even before it was official. Because that kind of service and sacrifice has defined our nation for more than two centuries.

In America, we look out for one another. We see citizenship not just as a collection of rights but also as a set of responsibilities. That's who we are. And that's what brought so many to our shores, including Kingsley Elebo. Kingsley came here at the age of 35 from Nigeria, pursued his master's in information technology. He's now pursuing his doctorate. He wants to become a professor so he can help America lead the world in high-tech industries of tomorrow. And what Kingsley said is, "What makes this country great is that if you're a citizen you're part of something bigger than yourself." And he's right. And we're glad that, as of today, Kingsley is part of it too.

We're also glad to welcome Pertula George-Redd. Pertula arrived in America from St. Lucia at the age of 23, leaving behind her parents and seven siblings. She came here to study international development. She stayed, for over a decade now, to work at non-profits that teach our kids about sustainable foods and how to live a healthier life by eating well—which I know Michelle is very happy about. Today, she also has the gratitude of her new nation. So, thank you so much.

We are so proud of everybody here. In each of you, we see the true spirit of America. And we see a bit of ourselves, too, because most of our stories trace back to moments just like this one. To an ancestor who, just like the men and women here today, raised their right hand and recited that sacred oath.

And the point is that unless you are one of the first Americans, unless you are a Native American, you came from someplace else. That's why we've always defined ourselves as a nation of immigrants. And we've always been better off for it. The promise we see in those who come from all over the world is one of our greatest strengths. It's kept our workforce young. It keeps our businesses on the cutting edge. It's helped to build the greatest economic engine that the world has ever known. And you think about the drive and the determination that it took for each of these 28 men and women to reach this moment. Imagine how far they'll go from here, the kind of difference that they'll be making on behalf of this country.

Immigration makes us a stronger. It keeps us vibrant. It keeps us hungry. It keeps us prosperous. It is part of what makes this such a dynamic country. And if we want to keep attracting the best and the brightest that the world has to offer, then we need to do a better job of welcoming them. We've known for years that our immigration system is broken, that we're not doing enough to harness the talent and ingenuity of all those who want to work hard and find a place here in America. And after avoiding the problem for years, the time has come to fix it once and for all. The time has come for a comprehensive, sensible immigration reform.

Now, a couple months ago in Nevada, and then last month again in my State of the Union address, I talked about how Republicans and Democrats were ready to tackle this problem together. And the good news is that since then, we've seen some real action in Congress. There are bipartisan groups in both the House and the Senate working to tackle this challenge, and I applaud them for that. We are making progress, but we've got to finish the job, because this issue is not new.

Everyone pretty much knows what's broken. Everybody knows how to fix it. We've all proposed solutions and we've got a lot of white papers and studies. And we've just got, at this point, to work up the political courage to do what's required to be done. So I expect a bill to be

put forward. I expect the debate to begin next month. I want to sign that bill into law as soon as possible.

We know that real reform means continuing to strengthen our border security and holding employers accountable. We know that real reform means providing a responsible pathway to earned citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants who are currently living in the shadows—a pathway that includes passing a background check and paying taxes and a penalty, and learning English and then, going to the back of the line behind everyone else who is trying to come here legally.

We know that real reform requires modernizing the legal immigration system so that our citizens don't have to wait years before their loved ones are able to join them in America, and so that we're attracting the highly skilled entrepreneurs and engineers that are going to help create good paying jobs and grow our economy.

So let's get this done, and let's do it in a way that keeps faith with our history and our values. And no other country on Earth welcomes as many new arrivals as us. And as long as the promise of America endures, as long as we continue to stand tall as a beacon of hope and opportunity, then the world's hardest workers, the hungriest entrepreneurs, the men and women who are willing to make enormous sacrifices to get a better life—not just for themselves but for their children and their grandchildren, they're going to keep on coming.

And like the millions who came before—and like the 28 Americans who are here today—they will bring with them new hopes and new dreams, new ideas and new optimism about our future. That will make us stronger. That's how we'll make sure that our best days are ahead of us and not behind us.

So I want to thank each and every one of you for allowing me the opportunity to share in this incredible moment. One of the best things I get to do as President of the United States is to address all of you as fellow citizens. God bless you and God bless the United States of America.

And we now have one last piece of business to conclude the ceremony. I'd like to ask one of our newest citizen, Julian de la Valle, from Colombia, to lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Julian.

*[At the point, Mr. de la Valle led the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.]*

*The President.* Congratulations. Congratulations all of you. Thank you.

And now, enjoy the White House, all right? *[Laughter]* Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:36 a.m. in the East Room at the White House.

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