

Remarks at an Immigration and Naturalization Service Ceremony on
Ellis Island, New York
July 10, 2001

Thank you very much, Mr. Attorney General. I appreciate your kind words, and I appreciate your service to America. My fellow Americans who stand behind us, congratulations.

Just a few minutes ago, I was the leader of another country. Now it's my honor to speak to you as the leader of your country. And the great thing about America is, you don't have to listen unless you want to. *[Laughter]*

Governor Pataki, it's great to be with you. Mayor Giuliani, thank you both for your kind comments. Senator Schumer—Charles Ellis Schumer, who was named for Ellis Island—and Senator Clinton, thank you all for being here. Congressman Fossella and Congresswoman Maloney, thank you for being here. Assistant Attorney General Dinh, thank you for your service to our country. I made a great appointment when I picked him. Silvia Sanchez, thank you for singing the national anthem.

And ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to be here. I'm pleased to be joined by two members of my Cabinet who are Americans by choice, Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Mel Martinez.

This little piece of land, less than 30 acres in all, is like no other place in America. Twelve million souls arrived here and would speak of the experience for the rest of their lives. They remembered the difficulties along with the joys. They remembered the long lines—never longer than on a single day in 1907, when more than 11,000 new immigrants filed through this hall. They remembered how loud it was here and how confusing. There was no President to greet them, only people with clipboards, stethoscopes, and a lot of questions. A man from Italy describes seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time.

He said, "The thrill was unbelievable—but always the fear because you had to go through Ellis Island."

For all that, they kept hoping; they kept believing; and they kept coming. And 100 million Americans can draw a straight line from the life they know today to a moment in this hall, when a name was called and a person took the first step toward citizenship in the United States of America.

Each of you took that first step some time ago. Several of you have been here for decades. This group of new Americans includes students, teachers, a restaurant owner, a professor, a bartender, an insurance agent, a doctor, and a violinist. For all of you, the oath of citizenship is more than a formality. And today America is more than your home; it's your country. This is one of the things that makes our country so unique. With a single oath, all at once, you become as fully American as the most direct descendant of a Founding Father.

The Founders themselves decided that when they declared independence and wrote our Constitution. You see, citizenship is not limited by birth or background. America at its best is a welcoming society. We welcome not only immigrants themselves but the many gifts they bring and the values they live by. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants take the oath of citizenship every year. Each has come not only to take but to give. They come asking for a chance to work hard, support their families, and to rise in the world. And together, they make our Nation more, not less, American.

Immigration is not a problem to be solved. It is a sign of a confident and successful nation. And people who seek to make America their home should be met

in that spirit by representatives of our Government. New arrivals should be greeted not with suspicion and resentment but with openness and courtesy.

As many immigrants can testify, that standard has not always been observed. For those seeking entry, the process is often a prolonged ordeal full of complexities and burdens. I'm committed to changing this with INS reforms that treat every immigrant with respect and fairness.

Today here's the goal for the INS: a 6-month standard from start to finish for processing applications for immigration. It won't be achievable in every case, but it's the standard of this administration, and I expect the INS to meet it. Not every applicant is entitled to admission, but every applicant is entitled to a timely and courteous review of his or her case.

We can help legal immigrants in other ways. If a child's parent and financial sponsor should pass away, we should permit the other parent to take over as a sponsor. And in the case of a minor child, entitlement to a visa should be measured by the age on the date of the application, not on the date the INS has finally processed the visa.

And we should spare families the hardship of separation while one member is awaiting a green card. I support providing an extension of the temporary window that allows people to file for legal residency without having to return to their country of origin. And I urge the Members of the United States Congress to act swiftly on 245(i) reform.

In the life of an immigrant, citizenship is a defining event. In the life of our Nation, new citizens bring renewal. By taking an oath, as you have done today, immigrants affirm a belief in the American creed. For most Americans, there's no formal moment of affirmation, but to each of us fall the same responsibilities. Our democracy's sustained by the moral commitments we share: reverence for justice and obedience to the law, tolerance and decent

respect for the opinions of others, responsibility not only to ourselves but for our families and neighborhoods, love of country shown not in prideful boasts but in modest gratitude, and an active concern for our Nation's future.

That future depends on the values of self-government, our sense of duty, loyalty, self-confidence, and regard for the common good. We're a diverse country and getting more diverse. And these virtues are what keeps this great country together. Believing in them and living by them, this great land will always be united.

When they left behind the old world, the millions who landed here at Ellis Island came with a vision of a better life. They sought more than economic opportunity, though that was surely part of it. They wanted more than political freedom, though that was crucial. Above all, they wanted the rights, the duties, and the dignity of American citizenship. This place is now a museum, but it stands for a living tradition. And on Ellis Island today, the great hope of America is renewed.

Since becoming the President, I've gotten to do a lot of really fascinating things. There's nothing like—quite like the event this morning. So will you please join me, and rise, as we say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Right hand up, please. Actually, right hand on your heart. [*Laughter*]

[*At this point, the President led the participants in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.*]

Congratulations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Registry Room of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. George E. Pataki of New York and Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York City.