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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT NATURALIZATION CEREMONY

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Thank you very much. It's good to be with you. I am grateful for the chance to witness this joyous and uplifting ceremony. It is inspiring to see people of many different ages, many different countries raise their hands and swear an oath to become citizens of the United States of America.

For some of you, this day comes after a long and difficult journey. For all of you, this is a defining moment in your lives. America is now more than your home; America is your country. I welcome you to this free nation. I congratulate you and your families, and it's an honor to call you fellow Americans.

I appreciate the Attorney General. Dr. González, thank you, sir. And, Alfonso, it's good to be up here with you. I want to thank the President General of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Ms. Presley Wagoner, for letting us use this fantastic facility for this important ceremony. Thank you for singing the National Anthem so beautifully.

It is fitting that we hold this ceremony at the home of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The Daughters of the American Revolution were the daughters of immigrants, because the leaders of our revolution all had ancestors who came from abroad. As new citizens of the United States, you now walk in the footsteps of millions. And with the oath you've sworn, you're every bit as American as those who came before you.

Our immigrant heritage has enriched America's history. It continues to shape our society. Each generation of immigrants brings a renewal to our national character and adds vitality to our culture. Newcomers have a special way of appreciating the opportunities of America, and when they seize those opportunities, our whole nation benefits.

In the 1970s, an immigrant from Ireland -- or the 1790s, an immigrant from Ireland designed the White House, right where Laura and I live. And he helped build the Capitol. In the 1990s, an immigrant from Russia helped create the Internet search engine Google. In between, new citizens have made contributions in virtually every professional field, and millions of newcomers have strengthened their communities through quiet lives and hard work and family and faith.

America's welcoming society is more than a cultural tradition, it is a fundamental promise of our democracy. Our Constitution does not limit citizenship by background or birth. Instead, our nation is bound together by a shared love of liberty and a conviction that all people are created with dignity and value. Through the generations, Americans have upheld that vision by welcoming new citizens from across the globe -- and that has made us stand apart.

One of my predecessors, President Ronald Reagan, used to say this, "You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Japan, but you cannot become Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the world, can come to live in America and be an American."

The new Americans we welcome today include men and women from 20 countries on five continents. Their ages range from 18 to 59, and they work as teachers and small business managers, and nurses, and software engineers and other professions.

One new citizen is Veronica Pacheco. Veronica first came to the United States from Bolivia 15 years ago. In 2000, she moved here permanently and found a job at a catering company in Virginia. Every Friday and Saturday, she spent five hours studying English at the local community college. Over the years she saved enough money to buy her own townhouse. Here's what Veronica says about America: "This is a country of opportunity. If you want to be successful, you can do it. You can have your dreams come true here."

Another new citizen is Masoon Shaheen. Masoon grew up in Kuwait, and moved to the United States with her husband seven years ago. She enrolled in the community college to improve her English, took a job teaching Marines to speak Arabic. Here's what Masoon said: "The United States is a symbol of justice, freedom and liberty. I love that. Here they respect people because they are people. I feel I am honored, and I feel that I'm loved."

America is stronger and more dynamic when we welcome new citizens like Masoon and Veronica to our democracy. With that in mind, I've called on Congress to increase the number of green cards that can lead to citizenship. I support increasing the number of visas available for foreign-born workers in highly-skilled fields like science, medicine and technology. I've signed legislation creating a new Office of Citizenship at the Department of Homeland Security to promote knowledge of citizenship rights and procedures.

And after September the 11th, I signed an executive order making foreign-born members of our military immediately eligible for citizenship, because those willing to risk their lives for our democracy should be full participants in our democracy.

Over the past four years, more than 20,000 men and women in uniform have become citizens of the country they serve. They've taken the citizenship oath on the decks of aircraft carriers, on deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, and at military bases around the world. At Bethesda Naval Medical Center, I watched a brave Marine born in Mexico raise his right hand and become a citizen of the country he had defended in uniform for more than 26 years. It's a privilege to be the Commander-in-Chief of men and women like these, and I'm proud to call them fellow citizens.

All who swear the oath of citizenship are doing more than completing a legal process. They're making a lifelong pledge to support the values and the laws of

America. The pledge comes with great privileges, and it also comes with great responsibilities. I believe every new citizen has an obligation to learn the customs and values that define our nation, including liberty and civic responsibility, equality under God, tolerance for others, and the English language.

Those of us who have been citizens for many years have responsibilities, as well. Helping new citizens assimilate is a mission that unites Americans by choice and by birth. I appreciate the work of patriotic organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution. Some of the new Americans here today might have used DAR's Manual for Citizenship to prepare you for the citizenship test. They obviously did a pretty good job, since you passed. (Laughter.)

Many other organizations, from churches to businesses to civic organizations, are answering the call to help new citizens succeed in our country, and I am grateful for all those who reach out to people who are going to become citizens.

Government is doing its part to help new citizens succeed, as well. The Office of Citizenship has created a new official guide for immigrants. This free publication includes practical advice on tasks like finding housing and jobs, or enrolling your children in school, or paying taxes.

We're conducting outreach programs with faith-based and community groups to offer civics and English language courses. My administration will continue to pursue policies that open a path to education and jobs, promote ownership, and to give every citizen a chance to realize the American Dream.

Our nation is now in the midst of the debate on immigration policy, and it's good. Immigration is an important topic. Immigration is also an emotional topic. And we need to maintain our perspective as we conduct this debate. At its core, immigration is a sign of a confident and successful nation. It says something about our country that people around the world are willing to leave their homes and leave their families and risk everything to come to America. Their talent and hard work and love of freedom have helped make America the leader of the world. And our generation will ensure that America remains a beacon of liberty and the most hopeful society the world has ever known.

America is a nation of immigrants, and we're also a nation of laws. All of you are here because you followed the rules and you waited your turn in the citizenship line. Yet some violate our immigration laws and enter our country illegally, and that undermines the system for all of us. America should not have to choose between being a welcoming society and being a lawful society. We can be both at the same time. And so, to keep the promise of America, we must enforce the laws of America.

We must also reform those laws. No one is served by an immigration system that allows large numbers of people to sneak across the border illegally. Nobody benefits when illegal immigrants live in the shadows of society. Everyone suffers when people seeking to provide for their families are left at the mercy of criminals, or stuffed in the back of 18-wheelers, or abandoned in the desert to die. America needs comprehensive immigration reform.

I've laid out a proposal for comprehensive immigration reform that includes three critical elements: securing the border, strengthening the immigration enforcement inside our country, and creating a temporary worker program. These elements depend on and reinforce one another, and together they will give America an immigration system that meets the needs of the 21st century.

The first element is securing our border. Our immigration system cannot function if we cannot control the border. Illegal immigration puts a strain on law enforcement and public resources, especially in our border communities. Our nation is also fighting a war on terror, and terrorists crossing the border could create destruction on a massive scale. The responsibility of government is clear: We must enforce the border.

Since I took office, we've increased funding for border security by 66 percent. We've expanded the Border Patrol to more than 12,000 agents, an increase of more than 2,700 agents. And the budget next year funds another 1,500 new agents. We're helping these dedicated men and women do their jobs by providing them with cutting-edge technology, like infrared cameras, advanced motion sensors, and unmanned aerial vehicles. We're installing protective infrastructure, such as vehicle barriers and fencing in urban areas, to prevent people from crossing the border illegally. And we're integrating manpower and technology and infrastructure in more unified ways than ever. Our objective is to keep the border open to trade and tourism, and closed to criminals and drug dealers and terrorists.

Our strategy to secure the border is getting results. Since I took office, our agents have apprehended and sent home more than 6 million people entering this country illegally, including more than 400,000 with criminal records. Federal, state and local and travel enforcement officials are working side-by-side. Through the Arizona Border Control Initiative we apprehended more than 600,000 illegal immigrants in Arizona last year. The men and women of our Border Patrol have made good progress, but we have much more work ahead and we cannot be satisfied until we're in full control of the border.

We're also changing the way we process those we catch crossing the border illegally. More than 85 percent of the illegal immigrants we apprehend are from Mexico, and most are sent back home within 24 hours. We face a different challenge with non-Mexicans. For decades, government detention facilities did not have enough beds for the non-Mexican illegal immigrants caught at the border and so most were released back into society. They were each assigned a court date, but virtually nobody showed up. This practice, catch-and-release, is unwise, and my administration is going to end it.

To end catch-and-release, we're increasing the number of beds and detention facilities by 12 percent this year, and by another 32 percent next year. We're also expanding our use of a process called expedited removal, which allows us to send non-Mexican illegal immigrants home more quickly.

Last year, it took an average of 66 days to process one of these illegal immigrants. Now, we're doing it in 21 days. The goal is to increase the process faster. It's helped us end the catch-and-release for illegal immigrants from Brazil and Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua caught crossing our Southwest border. And since last summer, we've cut the number of non-Mexican illegal immigrants released in society by more than a third. We've set a goal to end catch-and-release over the next year. I look forward to working with Congress to close loop holes that makes it difficult for us to process illegal immigrants from certain countries. And we will continue to press foreign governments, like China, to take back their citizens who have entered our country illegally.

When illegal immigrants know they're going to be caught and sent home, they will be less likely to break the rules in the first place. And the system will be more orderly and secure for those who follow the law.

The second part of a comprehensive immigration reform is strengthening enforcement of our laws in the interior of our country. Since I took office, we've increased funding for immigration enforcement by 42 percent, and these resources have helped our agents bring to justice some very dangerous people: smugglers, terrorists, gang members, and human traffickers. For example, through Operation Community Shield, federal agents have arrested nearly 2,300 gang members who were here illegally, including violent criminals like the members of MS-13.

Better interior enforcement also requires better work site enforcement. Businesses have an obligation to abide by the law. The government has the responsibility to help them do so. Last year, I signed legislation to more than double the resources dedicated to work site enforcement. We'll continue to confront the problem of document fraud, because hard-working business owners should not have to act as detectives to verify the status of their workers.

Next month, we're going to launch law enforcement task forces in 11 major cities to dismantle document fraud rings. We're working to shut down the forgers who create the phony documents to stop the smugglers who traffic in human beings, and to ensure that American businesses are compliant with American law.

The third part of comprehensive immigration reform is to make the system more rational, orderly, and secure by creating a new temporary worker program. This program would provide a legal way to match willing foreign workers with willing American employers to fill the jobs that Americans are unwilling to do. Workers should be able to register for legal status on a temporary basis. If they decide to apply for citizenship, they would have to get in line. This program would help meet the demands of a growing economy and would allow honest workers to provide for their families while respecting the law.

A temporary worker program is vital to securing our border. By creating a separate legal channel for those entering America to do an honest day's labor, we would dramatically reduce the number of people trying to sneak back and forth across the border. That would help take the pressure off the border and free up law enforcement to focus on the greatest threats to our security, which are criminals and drug dealers and terrorists.

The program would also improve security by creating tamper-proof identification cards that would allow us to keep track of every temporary worker who is here on a legal basis and help us identify those who are here illegally.

One thing the temporary worker program should not do is provide amnesty for people who are in our country illegally. I believe granting amnesty would be unfair, because it would allow those who break the law to jump ahead of people like you all, people who play by the rules and have waited in the line for citizenship.

Amnesty would also be unwise, because it would encourage future waves of illegal immigration, it would increase pressure on the border and make it difficult for law enforcement to focus on those who mean us harm. For the sake of justice and border security, I firmly oppose amnesty.

This week, the Senate plans to consider legislation on immigration reform. Congress needs to pass a comprehensive bill that secures the border, improves interior enforcement, and creates a temporary worker program to strengthen our security and our economy. Completing a comprehensive bill is not going to be easy. It will require all of us in Washington to make tough choices and make compromises. And that is exactly what the American people sent us here to do.

As we move toward the process, we also have a chance to move beyond tired choices and the harsh attitudes of the past. The immigration debate should be conducted in a civil and dignified way. No one should play on people's fears, or try to pit neighbors against each other. No one should pretend that immigrants are threats to American identity, because immigrants have shaped America's identity.

No one should claim that immigrants are a burden on our economy because the work and enterprise of immigrants helps sustain our economy. We should not give into pessimism. If we work together, I'm confident we can meet our duty to fix our immigration system and deliver a bill that protects our people, upholds our laws, and makes our people proud.

It's a joyful day for all of you, and it's one you'll always remember. When you came here this morning, I was the President of another country. Now I'm the President of your country, and I'm grateful for that honor. I wish you good luck as citizens of the greatest nation on the face of the Earth.

May God bless you and your families, and may God continue to bless America. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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10:34 A.M. EST