

## NATURALIZATION CEREMONY: MAY 1, 2008

Judge Svet, distinguished guests, beloved family and friends, and most importantly, to my 470 new fellow Americans who have waited and waited and waited for this day to come:

As Judge Svet said, I am the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Mexico. This means that I am in charge of the office that represents the United States in all criminal and civil lawsuits that are filed in federal court in this state. The easiest way to understand my job is just to think of me as a federal prosecutor and the chief federal law enforcement officer in the state.

But this day has nothing to do with me or my office or what my office does. This day has everything to do with you. On behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice and the entire Executive Branch of the U.S. Government, I want to congratulate you on surviving the endurance test that the naturalization process has meant for you. I am very touched that each of you loved the country I have always called home enough to leave your own birth countries and become citizens of this one.

When I think about the process that you went through to become citizens and compare it to the process that I went through, there really is no comparison. Each of you knows full well all the steps you had to take and how long you had to wait to become U.S. citizens. I, on the other hand, went through a completely different process. It involved my dad, my mom, and a hospital in Santa Fe back in August of 1965. The rest of the details aren't important. Apparently, I was there but I don't remember too much about it. I confess that I have always taken my U.S. citizenship for granted. Since there are 470 of you who became U.S. citizens a few moments ago, I'm guessing there are at least 470 people who would encourage me never again to take my citizenship for granted but instead to cherish it every day for the God-given blessing that it is.

The honor of speaking to you on this day, and preparing what it was I was going to say, caused me to think about what it means to be a U.S.

citizen and how fortunate I am. I thank you for that gentle reminder.

In preparing my remarks, I did some research about which countries you emigrated from and the process you had to go through in order to become USCs. You come from 46 different countries: Mexico, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Laos, Nepal, and 40 other countries. You come from every continent on Earth except Antarctica. When you came here initially, you did so legally. Most of you waited five long years before you could submit your naturalization application and then you had to undergo tests and interviews and background checks. You had to be what the law calls “persons of good moral character.” You had to learn to read, write, and speak English. You had to learn American history and American government. And you waited and waited and waited. And today, when you took that oath, your dream finally came true.

I want to say a special word to those among you who are in the US military. I’m told there are some active duty military personnel in the ranks. I am a Lieutenant Colonel in the N.M. Air National Guard. Next Thursday will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my commissioning as an officer in the U.S. Air Force. You guys are really something: you came to a country not your own, you enlisted in the military to fight if necessary for a country of which you were not even yet a citizen, and in so doing you pledged to lay down your lives in the service of this country before this country was even ready to call you one of its own. That is stunning to me and, on behalf of the people of this state, this country, and the rest of the people who wear the uniform of the U.S. military, I just want to say thank you.

At the beginning of my remarks, I congratulated you on seeing this long process through to completion. I now want to congratulate you on making the *right choice* in doing so. There are an estimated 12 million people in the United States who made a different choice – they chose to come here illegally. When they first came here, they took one look at the long and burdensome naturalization process and said “that’s too difficult, too many rules, no way I can qualify, gotta wait too long.”

You, on the other hand, made the right choice, even though it was the harder choice to make. That is why I am congratulating you and why I am prosecuting so many of them.

I'd like to shift gears now and talk briefly about the historical context of this time in which we live in America. You have become U.S. citizens at a critical time – a defining moment – in the history of America. In my way of thinking, there have been four especially critical times in American history when this country was really tested, when what we stood for as a nation was under intense attack, four defining moments that have made and shaped America into what it is today.<sup>1</sup>

1. The Revolutionary War and the drafting and adoption of the Constitution: 232 years ago, a bunch of undertrained, underarmed, and overmatched ragtag soldiers decided they had had enough and declared independence from the awesome British empire. Then after they overcame all odds and defeated the British army and navy, they somehow came up with the rules for a government that had never before existed...and they were so smart and so visionary that those rules still are in place today. That was the first defining moment in American history.

2. The Civil War: the USA nearly came to an end over the issue of whether people who happened to be black could be enslaved against their will or, in other words, could be owned just like a piece of property. And we went to war against each other to prove that the principle of slavery was wrong. And to show you just how far America has come since the Civil War, there is today a man named Barack Obama – a black man – who could very well become the next POTUS. So the Civil War was the second critical time in the nation's history.

3. The time between 1915-1945: this time frame spans WWI, Great Depression, and WWII. It is enough to say that, had America not

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<sup>1</sup>I credit former acting Deputy Attorney General Craig Morford for briefly enumerating these four defining moments in informal remarks at the United States Attorneys' Conference in Washington, D.C., on February 13, 2008. The explanation of the meaning of those moments in our history is my own.

brought its full military might and the total commitment of its citizenry to bear on other countries' shores and other countries' soil, had hundreds of thousands of Americans not laid down their lives in the defense of freedom, the world today would be *totally different*. And we did so at a time when our economy was broken down, unemployment and poverty were at all-time highs, and our country was teetering on the precipice of sheer chaos. That was the transcendent challenge of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and we passed that test with flying colors.

4. Which brings me to the fourth critical time and it is the time in which you have chosen to become U.S. citizens: let's just call it the fight against extremist terrorism. When al Qaeda tried to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993, when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Oklahoma City courthouse in 1995, when American embassies were bombed in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and when the USS Cole was bombed in 2000, we paid attention. But when those four planes were hijacked on 9/11/01 and flown into buildings or into the ground, we knew that something had changed. You have become American citizens during the fourth critical time in the history of this nation. You have become citizens of this country at a time when we are the envy of the world and when some people so detest our way of life that they want to kill us wherever they can find us, either here or abroad. With your help, we will prevail against these enemies just as we have prevailed against all others. That has been our history and that will be our future.

There are a thousand reasons why we as Americans are the envy of the world. We are the strongest economically, we are the strongest militarily, and we have the richest and most diverse culture of any country in the world. We trust our hospitals to heal us, not to harm us. We trust our police forces to help us, not to hurt us. And we trust our food and water supplies to nourish us, not to endanger us.

But the single idea that causes us to be the envy of the rest of the world is the freedom that we enjoy. When you took that oath today, you became a citizen of a nation that grants its citizens more rights than any other nation on Earth. If it is your belief system to wear certain clothes

or read certain books, you may do it freely here. If it is your belief system to pray 6 times/day or not at all, you are welcome to do that here. If you'd like to go out onto Civic Plaza with a megaphone and complain about the mayor, or the governor, or the president, then you may do so. America is a tolerant, freedom-loving place. You should rejoice in the many freedoms that you now have.

And the real beauty of America is that we *all* enjoy the same rights. No matter whether you make \$300K or \$30K, no matter whether you drive a Ferrari or a Ford pickup, no matter whether you live in a mansion or a mobile home, you have the same rights as every other American. You now have more rights than you would have anywhere in the world. That is the reward for making the choice that you made.

But with those freedoms and rights come certain responsibilities. You have the responsibility to obey the rule of law. You have the responsibility to vote and to serve on juries, two ways in which ordinary citizens participate in our democratic process. And, in the end, you have the responsibility to do the best you can with what you have. Nobody ever regretted giving their very best and trying as hard as they could to achieve their goals.

I'd like to leave you with three wishes that I have for you: May you always remember that America in general, NM in particular, is nothing more than a collection of individuals, and be they black or brown or white, native or immigrant, rich or poor, every person deserves to be heard, every person needs a voice, and every person needs a champion.

May you make a positive difference – in whatever way you can, large or small – in the democracy that makes the USA the best country in the world in which to live.

And my final wish for you is that, for all the rest of your days, you are as proud of America as you are today and that America is as proud of you as she is today. God bless you.