

REMARKS BY
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NATURALIZATION CEREMONY
U.S. DISTRICT COURTHOUSE
PENSACOLA, FLORIDA
FEBRUARY 25, 2005

Thank you, Charles Beall, for that kind introduction. Judge Timothy, Judge Davis, Judge Hilliard, honored guests, our newest citizens. On behalf of nearly 300 million of your fellow Americans, I extend a welcome to you as the newest citizens of the United States.

As Supervisor of Elections, I greet you on behalf of the almost 300 thousand residents of Escambia County. And for those of you from other communities, the public officials from your home county.

The oath you have just taken is one of the most serious obligations of your life. For those of you who are married, you know what a giant step your exchange of wedding vows was. For those of you who have a military background, the allegiance you swore was a solemn act. The ceremony we witnessed today represents both a giant and a solemn act.

But even more, it represents a disavowal of your former citizenship, followed immediately by taking upon yourselves the responsibilities of being an American.

Yes, I used the word responsibilities, because like this coin I hold in my hand – a U.S. quarter dollar – being an American is not a one-sided proposition. It's not just about your rights, but about what acquiring those rights means to you in the form of duties. This coin, like your citizenship, is two sided. On one side, along with our first and arguably greatest president, George Washington, is the word 'liberty' – representing your individual rights as an American. Rights that are endowed by our Creator and enforced in courtrooms like this all over our republic.

On the other side of the coin, along with our national emblem – the American bald eagle – appears the motto, ‘E Pluribus Unum’ – out of many, one – chosen to appear on our currency to represent the coming together of the thirteen colonies into one nation. But it’s also a great articulation of the tremendous responsibilities we all share as individuals to participate in our democracy. It says to you that as a free person living in a free country, the freedom you enjoy is not free – it comes with a price, and that price is your responsibilities...your duties...to do your share in seeing that *that* freedom is preserved.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to be born in America inherited those liberties as a birthright – we did not have to do anything to earn them. Others before us fought and died that America could survive as a free nation and a beacon for the rest of the world.

But you’ve had to do much more. You had to do it the hard way. You had to *earn* it. For that effort we all congratulate you.

One of the most important rights that you now enjoy is the right to vote – to select your leaders – to choose the people who make the laws that govern you and all of us, and to choose the people, like me, who see that those laws are carried out. That voting is a precious right needs no more validation than the joy we all witnessed a few weeks ago, as the people of Iraq exercised their right to vote in free elections – for the first time in over 50 years – defying threats of violence and death. Earlier, we saw the people of Afghanistan go to the polls in a free election for the first time in their country’s five thousand year history.

These are but two examples of the seeds of democracy beginning to sprout where tyranny once dominated. While we pray that this march of freedom continues across the globe, it is well for us to remember that for democracy to succeed individuals must do their part by exercising their right to vote – a right that far too many here in America take for granted.

Now, *you* have the right to vote. Indeed, let me suggest that it is your duty to vote. As Supervisor of Elections, I am proud that one of the people in my office who joins me here today to help register to vote those of you who wish to register, is herself a naturalized American citizen. Wilma Davio, will you please stand? Wilma is a former citizen of Ireland, and she and I will be here after the program to help with your registration.

It is a special pleasure for me to be here today in this courtroom. When I was five years old, my father was sworn in as a federal judge right across the street in the old courthouse. I grew up watching my dad preside over naturalization ceremonies – which he still says is his favorite courthouse work. And during my previous work as an aide to a United States Senator and Congressman, I was honored to participate in these very special events. I also found it one of the more rewarding parts of my job.

Now, I am so privileged to be here as an elected official – having been chosen through the democratic process – to see that you as our newest eligible citizens are registered to vote. Having been entrusted by the voters with this responsibility is truly humbling.

America has been described as a melting pot, where everyone, save Native Americans, has ancestors from somewhere else. I have to remind myself sometimes that my own great grandfather came over from the United Kingdom.

I like to think of America as a tapestry, with each new citizen as a thread. And, as each thread is woven in, not only does the fabric become more beautiful, but it also becomes stronger.

You are now adding to the strength and the beauty of the fabric that is America. You are now endowed with all of the rights enjoyed by every other American.

The coin I hold in my hand is the currency of your new nation. From this day forward, each time you hold a coin in your hand, it is my hope that you'll remember that the rights you now enjoy come with the obligations you share with your fellow Americans...especially your responsibility to participate in the electoral process.

As you enjoy your rights and fulfill your duties, may God bless you, and God bless America – your new country.