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Swearing-in Ceremony for Surgeon General Dr. Antonio Novello 3/9/90 [OA 4728]

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 9, 1990

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT SWEARING-IN CEREMONY FOR
SURGEON GENERAL DR. ANTONIA NOVELLO

The Roosevelt Room

11:28 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Justice O'Connor and Secretary Sullivan, Senator Hatch, and Congressman Conte, and Dr. Mason, and other distinguished guests, in a few minutes we're going to make history three times over. Surgeon General Novello will be the first woman, first Hispanic and first Puerto Rican to become Surgeon General of the Public Health Service.

Lou Sullivan, our outstanding Secretary, and I agree that women and minorities who serve in vital and visible posts in government also serve as role models for our young people. And Toni, your success as Surgeon General will be an inspiration to millions of people.

Dr. Novello's life is already an amazing success story, a vibrant example of the American dream. Twenty years ago, she graduated from the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, and 12 years ago she joined the Public Health Service and rose quickly through the ranks.

Dr. Novello is a teacher, scholar, administrator and a physician who has first-hand knowledge of the Public Health Service and the National Institutes of Health.

This ceremony is more than a celebration -- it is the beginning of a solemn commitment to the American people. Dr. Novello, you have my -- you have the privilege, in my view, of working with the very best. And my respect and appreciation of my good friend, Lou Sullivan, grows every day as he fights for the good health of our people. In your hands, too, we now place the health of our people.

The paths ahead are difficult and in a few minutes, just the few minutes we've been here, 11 people have died from smoking -- 390,000 people each year. And we must also do all we can to put an end to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and AIDS. And because so many of these problems begin with our children it is only right that we ask a pediatrician to help. There is one thing each of us can do to live longer and live better, and that is to emphasis health promotion and disease prevention, and it's the best way to save lives and reduce the cost of medical care. Ultimately, we are all responsible for our own health. And we look to you, Dr. Novello, to help guide us in that effort. Godspeed and good luck in this important new assignment.

And now we'll ask Justice O'Connor to do the honors. I guess I'll wedge in on my little toe mark here. All right.

(Justice O'Connor administers the oath to Dr. Novello.)

DR. NOVELLO: Mr. President; Justice O'Connor; Mr. Secretary; my husband, Dr. Joe Novello; my mother, Ana Delia Flores; Dr. Mason; distinguished guests; my dearest family and friends; the

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American dream is well and alive today, and I might say today the "West Side Story" comes to the West Wing. (Laughter and applause.)

When I was a little girl attending public schools in Puerto Rico, I looked beyond the Caribbean and beyond El Yunque and beyond everywhere that I could. And all I wanted to do when I dreamed was to become a pediatrician, a doctor for the little kids in my hometown. I never told anyone that I wanted to be that. It seemed too grand of a notion.

Well, dreams sometimes come true in unexpected ways, and today I stand before you with pride and humility as the first Puerto Rican, Hispanic, female Surgeon General of this country. (Applause.)

Mr. President, you have bestowed a great honor and a great responsibility on me. By doing so, you have also sent a message. You have sent a message that somewhere this very morning, anywhere in San Francisco, San Antonio, Boston, Biloxi there's another minority girl or boy who can dream the dreams that I just dreamed yesterday of becoming the Surgeon General of this country.

I do not aspire to be the Surgeon General of the Hispanics, or the Surgeon General of the women, or the Surgeon General of the children. I aspire to be the Surgeon General of every American of this great country. (Applause.)

As a practicing physician, I learned what patients want from their doctor. They don't care if the doctor is male or female, if the doctor is black or white, if the doctor is Anglo or Hispanic, or even how they voted in the last election. What they do care is that the doctor has compassion, scientific excellence, availability at all times -- the good ones and the bad ones. That's the definition of a good doctor.

Once a dream, it is now my pledge, to be a good doctor for all who live in this great country. My motto as your Surgeon General will be, "good science and good sense." And so, I ask for your help and the grace of God as I strive to give something back to the nation that has been so good to me.

Thank you very much. Dios lo vendiga and God bless America.

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11:35 A.M. EST