

## 40th Annual Naturalization Keynote

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Good morning. It is a dazzling day, and it's a hot one. I keep thinking of something a friend of mine said recently. He said, "There is no such thing as a bad, short speech." And that's what you're going to get today, because I can't compete with the Virginia temperature. I don't know why Thomas Jefferson chose to live here. He could have lived in Maine or Canada or someplace where it's nice and cool, but he chose to live here for various reasons, and mainly because he loved it.

He loved this land, and this is what happened last year. My wife and I were in London on the eleventh of September, and we were having lunch. She went to the ladies' room, and while she was gone, I heard someone say to the waitress, "You know, a plane crashed into the World Trade Center," and I said to myself, "Here they go talking about science fiction again. Can't they talk about real life? A plane crashed into the World Trade Center." And then as minutes went by, we found out this was true: two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center, and then my wife and I decided-we had a few more days left in Europe, but we wanted to get back to New York. Now when I look back on why we wanted to get back to New York, it can be traced to one thing, and that is love. We realized we loved this place we live in, New York City, and we wanted to get back. It's a very strange thing, because you know in New York we're very cool. We walk through the streets and we're very friendly, all right, but we're very cool. And it can be rough when you're riding the subways and the busses and people can be abrupt and sometimes rude. But generally, when you live in New York, you love it the way Jefferson loved this house. We wanted to get back with a yearning for New York, with a love-that's all you can call it, because it took us five days to get back, since all the flights were suspended into all the American airports.

When we finally got back, we took our bags home, and we went downtown to the Ground Zero area. We walked around there, and the place was still filled with a kind of gray ash. The police were there and the fire department, and there were hundreds of people there, volunteers from all parts of the country, helping the police and helping the construction workers, helping the steel workers-everybody helping, everybody wanting to help. It can be traced to one thing again: love! Everybody realized that this was the greatest disaster in American history, and there was an outpouring of love. That's the way I felt myself, and it made us think about being American.

Because you know, when you live in this country, here you are, you grow up, and there are all kinds of freedoms around you. In some parts of the world, they don't take freedoms for granted, but we suddenly realized what we had. We suddenly realized what a terrific country we live in. That's one of the things that happened – we began to think about being American, in ways that we never thought before.

The history of my family, my own family, is resurrected for me from time to time when I go to a place in New York called Ellis Island. I've been there eleven times, and every time I go there, I go to what's called the Great Hall. When you go into the Great Hall, you see a great mound of bags and trunks and all kinds of bags that people carried their possessions in. It's a mountain of history. Then you go around Ellis Island, and you see things that people left. You see prayer books and rosary beads and clothing of all kinds, shoes, baby shoes-all kinds of what they call artifacts, testifying to the kind of immigration that we've experienced.

A hundred years ago, in 1902, I think my own grandfather came to Ellis Island, but he never stayed and he never became a citizen because he was engaged in other work-getting guns for the Irish Republican Army and having them sent back. He never stayed long enough to think of becoming a citizen. My father came to America because he had to leave Ireland; he was also engaged in some rebellious activity. He never became a citizen, nor did my mother. My mother said, "Oh, no. I won't become a citizen. After all the Irish suffered for eight hundred years, I'm not going to betray them by becoming an American citizen."

Well, I'm an American citizen because nobody asked me where I wanted to be born. So I was born in Brooklyn, and then at the age of four I went back to Ireland, and the dream that my brother Malachy and I had too – he was born in Brooklyn, too – was to come back to America eventually. We used to talk about it when we were little kids in Limerick, about going to America. It wasn't easy in those days because we simply didn't have the money. We barely had enough money for milk or a loaf of bread-but someday it would happen.

The image in our minds was the skyline of New York City, the skyline of Manhattan. It was embedded in our minds because once in a while we would go to the movies and see that skyline. It was all very glamorous; it was going to be wonderful when we got back to New York. We would walk the streets, and I'd dance up and down like Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly. It would be wonderful. I'd get rich in no time whatsoever-I'd get a job, and I'd be rich! I'd have money, and there would be women, and I'd go to nightclubs, and I'd drive around in a big car. I'd have a great time, and I'd go to the beach. It would all be wonderful.

Then I came to New York eventually. On an October morning, the sun was shining; it was dawn. The sun was shining on the skyscrapers of New York. I came by ship. As the ship sailed into the harbor, I wanted to sing, and I wanted to dance on the deck of that ship because there it was, the New York skyline, and here I am, at last in heaven. In heaven!

So I got off the ship, and then there was reality. You had to get something called a job. You had to make a living; you had to have money; you had to have a place to live in. But I had no education; I left school at fourteen and never went to high school. And here I was nineteen, with nothing to offer and no skills. I didn't know anything except English. That's the one great gift the English gave us when they conquered us. Thank you for the English language!

In New York, then, I met people from all over the world. I worked in a hotel where all the waiters were from Greece and all the people in the kitchen were from Puerto Rico and spoke Spanish. I was meeting

all kinds of people, and I admired them because they struggled so much for themselves and their families. They worked so hard. Not only did they work hard day and night in the kitchens and factories of New York, they also had to learn English. I've been in Italy for the past three months, and I tried to learn Italian. I can't! They talk too fast. But I tried. I want to go back to Italy someday, and I want to be able to speak Italian. But I met Italians in New York City, and there's a huge Italian presence in New York City because whether you fly into New York or come in by ship, you're going to pass over or under something called the Verrazano Bridge—which is named after an Italian explorer, and you're coming to a place called America, which was named after an Italian explorer, and then you're going to come up the Hudson River, which was named after an English explorer, and then you come to Manhattan, which is an American Indian or Native American name, and when you come into Manhattan, you meet the world. The world! In one borough of New York out in Queens, the public schools have to deal with 120 different languages, all the way from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. So this is the melting pot. This is New York, and it extends all the way here to Virginia, to you.

I never went through a citizenship ceremony. I didn't have to, because I was born here. But I think if I had, if I sat in one of these seats, I would have been as excited as I know you are today. And then one of the sweetest things I noticed on the program is the presence of nine children who are going to receive citizenship certificates today. That's the future. You're the future because when you think of it, it isn't the unity, it's the diversity of this country that makes us so strong.

When I think of the people here and the kind of food they cook at home, I don't know what they eat in Afghanistan; I have no idea. I don't know what they eat in Zimbabwe. I have some idea of what they eat in Mexico because we have Mexican restaurants in New York. But when I think of what you cook when you go home, what you are doing is expanding the American language, because my children and grandchildren will know words that you brought into the country, just as Italians brought words into the country. Where would we be without the word "spaghetti"? And the French! Where would we be without the word "lingerie"? I love that word. It's the most beautiful word we ever borrowed from the French: "lingerie"! I could say it all day! So it's exciting to think of what you're going to add to the English language in the way of food or anything else, or what you're going to add to the American culture generally or the literature that you're going to bring in.

Nobody told me anything when I came here. If I were you, wherever you are, the first thing you should do for yourself and your children is find out where is the nearest public library, and go there. I can assure you, it will be air-conditioned! Take your children to that public library, and let them go around and look at the books and look at the pictures. There's one thing I've discovered- in American libraries, the librarians are very kind people, and they want you to use the library. If I were you, I'd go and find the local history of wherever you live. Let your children know about Virginia because it's such a rich state historically and culturally, and it's beautiful. Let the children discover this. And then let your children discover the music. You'll be bringing your own music, and that will enrich American music. For when you think of what you can get from American music-the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, hip, hop, rap, and classical American music from people like Duke Ellington and Aaron Copland! I envy you. I wish I were you because you have so much to look forward to, and your children have so much to look forward to. Thank you for becoming American citizens, and welcome!

