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Biden thanks new citizens for choosing America at a White House naturalization ceremony.



By David E. Sanger

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President Biden hosted an emotional naturalization ceremony Friday afternoon at the White House as part of a federal effort to swear in almost 10,000 new citizens in celebration of Independence Day — drawing sharp, but unspoken, contrasts with the policies of his predecessor, Donald J. Trump.

After nearly two dozen new citizens took the oath of allegiance in the East Room, Mr. Biden and his secretary of homeland security, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, used the moment to describe their own immigrant roots. Mr. Mayorkas recalled how his mother had twice been a political refugee, first fleeing the Nazis in Europe, and then escaping from Cuba with him when he was an infant.

“Today our nation is better than it was yesterday,” he said, “in part because we have new citizens.”

But it was Mr. Biden who explicitly thanked the new citizens — who came from Afghanistan, New Zealand, Iraq, Egypt and a dozen other countries — for picking the United States as their new home, a striking shift in tone in how immigrants, even legal ones, were often described during the Trump administration as a drain on American resources.

Mr. Biden talked about his own ancestors’ journey to America, leaving Ireland in a coffin-ship in 1849, a risk they took, he said, “having no idea whether they would make it across the Atlantic to the United States.” He then traced their move to Scranton, Pa. “I stand here on the shoulders of sacrifices of my great-great-grandfather, my great-grandfather, my grandfather...” he said, trailing off.

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At Friday's ceremony, Mr. Biden drifted into a description of how the United States was "founded on an idea," a topic he has often touched on in the past and even broached earlier in the day with the Los Angeles Dodgers as he celebrated their victory in the 2020 World Series. "Every other nation in the world was founded on your geography, or ethnicity or religion," he said, adding that "you can't define an American," to describe the nation's diversity.

As he spoke, the president recalled swearing in new citizens, all members of the military, in Saddam Hussein's palace in Baghdad during a visit years ago. "I got to swear them in, in the palace of a dictator," he said, evoking laughs. But then he turned to immigration reform, making his case for "smart border management," and praising "Vice President Harris's leadership for getting into the root causes of why people are migrating." He made no mention of the many arguments over what she accomplished during her recent visit to Central America.

"We need an immigration system that reflects our values and upholds our laws," he said. "We can do both."

Mr. Biden concluded the ceremony by presenting an award to a nurse from New York, Sandra Lindsay, an immigrant from Jamaica. He described her work saving coronavirus patients at a hospital on Long Island, saying "she poured her heart and soul" into the task even as some of her own relatives died. And she was "the first person in America to get fully vaccinated outside of clinical trials," he added. Her scrubs will be included in an exhibit about the pandemic at the Smithsonian, he said.

It was the first time a naturalization ceremony had been held on the White House grounds since Mr. Trump did so during the Republican National Convention last August. The five people who were naturalized at the time had been surprised by the invitation, and even more surprised to learn that the event had been broadcast onto the convention floor, becoming part of the political programming.

David E. Sanger is a White House and national security correspondent. In a 38-year reporting career for The Times, he has been on three teams that have won Pulitzer Prizes, most recently in 2017 for international reporting. His newest book is "The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage and Fear in the Cyber Age."

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