

OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on the Integrity of the Naturalization Process

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. American citizenship is the most valuable immigration benefit this nation confers. It is what the Supreme Court has called a "priceless treasure." *Fedorenko v. United States*, 449 U.S. 490, 507 (1981). It carries with it the full rights and privileges of membership in our constitutional republic—the right to vote, to serve on juries, to hold public office, and to claim the full protection of our laws. Precisely because citizenship is so consequential, Congress has always required that those who seek it through naturalization demonstrate that they deserve it. No foreigner, “alien” under the law, may claim any “right” to American citizenship.

I am here today because I am concerned—deeply concerned—that our naturalization system is not holding applicants to the substantive standards that Congress has prescribed. People are being naturalized without truly being put to their proof. And when the system fails to screen out those who do not meet the requirements for citizenship, Americans pay the price—sometimes with their lives.

I. THE SUBSTANTIVE REQUIREMENTS FOR NATURALIZATION

Congress did not design naturalization as a mere administrative formality. Under Section 316 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1427, an applicant for naturalization must demonstrate three things: first, that he or she is a person of good moral character; second, that he or she is "attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States"; and third, that he or she is "well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States."

These are not empty phrases. The regulatory framework makes clear that "attachment" to constitutional principles "implies a depth of conviction which would lead to active support of the Constitution," and that this requirement "contemplate[s] the exclusion from citizenship of applicants who are hostile to the basic form of government of the United States, or who disbelieve in the principles of the Constitution." 8 C.F.R. § 316.11.

The naturalization oath itself, prescribed by 8 U.S.C. § 1448, requires the applicant to "renounce and abjure absolutely and entirely all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty," and to pledge to "support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic" and to "bear true faith and allegiance to the same." This oath is the culmination of the

naturalization process—a solemn covenant between the new citizen and the nation. I had the honor in my former capacity of Acting Director of United States Citizenship and Immigration Services of administering that oath to hundreds of new U.S. Citizens, and I can tell you that it was a very moving experience every time – both for me and for them.

II. THE DEGRADATION OF THE NATURALIZATION PROCESS

Unfortunately, the history of our naturalization system is marked by periods in which these substantive requirements have been treated as obstacles to be overcome rather than standards to be enforced.

The most notorious example remains the Citizenship USA program—or "CUSA"—launched by the Clinton Administration's INS in 1995. CUSA was designed to eliminate the naturalization backlog by processing applications from start to finish within six months. The stated goal was commendable; the execution was catastrophic. As the Department of Justice Inspector General found, INS made "the timely completion of naturalization cases—or production—the guiding principle and pursued this principle at the expense of accuracy in the determination of eligibility for citizenship."

The consequences were staggering. More than 180,000 naturalization applications were processed without proper FBI fingerprint background checks. Among those, approximately 80,000 applicants had fingerprint checks that actually generated criminal records—records that were never reviewed before citizenship was conferred. The IG further found that the "good moral character" standard—"the standard at the heart of the determination of naturalization eligibility"—"was understood and applied differently throughout INS" even before CUSA, and that "INS officials did nothing to improve the known weaknesses before the program began."

CUSA was a cautionary tale of what happens when an agency prioritizes volume over integrity. But the underlying weaknesses it exposed—inconsistent adjudication standards, inadequate background checks, and insufficient scrutiny of applicants' genuine attachment to American principles—have persisted in various forms. Interview processes have been abbreviated. Adjudicators have faced pressure to meet production quotas. And the substantive inquiry into whether an applicant truly meets the statutory requirements has, too often, given way to a check-the-box exercise.

III. DENATURALIZATION AS AN ESSENTIAL SAFEGUARD

When the front end of the naturalization process fails, the back end—denaturalization—becomes essential. Denaturalization is the legal mechanism by which citizenship that was illegally or fraudulently procured can be revoked. It is not punitive; it

is corrective. It restores the integrity of the naturalization system by ensuring that those who obtained citizenship through fraud, concealment, or misrepresentation do not retain a benefit to which they were never entitled.

The importance of denaturalization as a systemic safeguard is well illustrated by Operations Janus and Second Look. Operation Janus, a Department of Homeland Security initiative that began during the Obama Administration, identified approximately 315,000 cases in which fingerprint data was missing from the centralized digital fingerprint repository. Among those, investigators discovered at least 858 cases in which individuals had prior deportation orders, adopted new identities, and then naturalized under those false identities without disclosing the prior orders. USCIS identified approximately 1,600 additional cases for referral and prosecution.

The first denaturalization resulting from Operation Janus came in January 2018, when a federal court in New Jersey revoked the citizenship of Baljinder Singh, an Indian national who had arrived at San Francisco International Airport in 1991 without any travel documents, was placed in exclusion proceedings, failed to appear for his immigration hearing, was ordered excluded and deported—and then, just four weeks later, filed an asylum application under a different name. He eventually naturalized under that false identity in 2006. Operation Second Look extended this work, with ICE proposing to review approximately 700,000 alien files for naturalization fraud.

These operations demonstrate a critical truth: the naturalization system has issued citizenship to individuals who obtained it through deception, and denaturalization is the only remedy available to correct those errors. Without a robust denaturalization capability, fraud in the naturalization process becomes permanent and irreversible.

It must be remembered that the denaturalization process is very burdensome for the federal government, and it would rather obviously be better for America in many ways to get naturalization (including rejections) correct the first time.

IV. THE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES: CASE STUDIES

I want to draw the Committee’s attention to two cases that illustrate, in the starkest possible terms, what happens when the naturalization system fails and when the tools to correct those failures are inadequate.

A. Mohamed Bailor Jalloh and the Old Dominion University Attack

On March 12 of this year, Mohamed Bailor Jalloh walked into a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps classroom at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and opened

fire while shouting "Allahu Akbar." He killed Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Shah—a decorated Army aviator and combat veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, a recipient of two Bronze Star Medals and an Air Medal with valor device—and wounded two ROTC cadets before students in the classroom subdued and killed him.

Jalloh was a naturalized American citizen, born in Sierra Leone. He had served as a specialist in the Virginia Army National Guard from 2009 to 2015. But in 2015, he traveled to Africa, made contact with ISIS-linked militants in Nigeria, and began communicating with a terrorist operative. He was arrested and, in October 2016, pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to ISIS. He was sentenced to eleven years in federal prison.

He should never have been free to carry out the Old Dominion attack. But the federal Bureau of Prisons released him early in 2024—just two years before the shooting. More critically, despite his terrorism conviction, Jalloh was never denaturalized and deported. Under current law, joining a terrorist organization after naturalization is treated as *prima facie* evidence of fraudulent procurement of citizenship—but only if the terrorist activity occurs within five years of naturalization. Because Jalloh's terrorist conduct fell outside that narrow window, the government lacked a clear legal pathway to revoke his citizenship and remove him from the country. A brave American soldier died because of that gap.

B. Mirsad Ramic

The case of Mirsad Ramic is, if anything, even more disturbing—because the evidence suggests that this individual never should have been naturalized in the first place.

Ramic came to the United States as a Bosnian refugee. His family settled in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and he eventually became a naturalized citizen. But as the Sixth Circuit recently recounted in detail, Ramic's naturalization ceremony itself revealed that he had no attachment whatsoever to the principles of the Constitution. During the ceremony, Ramic refused to recite the oath of allegiance to the United States. Instead, he proclaimed an Islamic oath and cursed all nonbelievers.

Let that sink in. A man stood in an American courtroom, at the very moment he was being granted the privilege of citizenship, and refused to take the oath that the law requires. He cursed those he called nonbelievers. And he was naturalized anyway.

What followed was tragically predictable. Ramic was radicalized by Abdullah el-Faisal, a Jamaican cleric previously convicted in the United Kingdom for advocating the

murder of Jews, Hindus, Christians, and Americans. Ramic ascended to Faisal's inner circle and became one of the few people trusted to raise money on his behalf. In 2014, Ramic and two Saudi nationals traveled from the United States to Syria to join ISIS. Once there, Ramic enlisted as a fighter, trained with weapons—with a particular interest in automatic weapons and sniper rifles—and fought in the siege of Kobani, a brutal campaign that resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

On social media, Ramic celebrated ISIS's public beheading of 21 Coptic Christians, writing that "if Jesus was alive today he would be with Islamic State, and behead Copts for taking him as god besides Allah." He posted a photograph of a United States "fallen veterans" brochure alongside an ISIS flag and rifles and asked his followers if they were "ready for a joint mission" to "make more [U.S. soldiers] fall." He expressed hope that President Obama's daughters would "be sold as slaves in one of the local markets."

Ramic was convicted in 2024 of providing material support to ISIS, conspiring to provide material support, and receiving military-type training from a designated foreign terrorist organization. The federal sentencing guidelines recommended 30 to 50 years. Federal prosecutors sought life imprisonment. The district court sentenced him to 101 months—roughly eight and a half years.

On May 13, 2026, the Sixth Circuit vacated that sentence as substantively unreasonable. Writing for the panel, Judge Amul Thapar called the sentence "shockingly low." The court found that the district judge had improperly minimized Ramic's conduct by characterizing him as merely a "soldier" in "an organized army," when in fact ISIS "isn't an army governed by the laws of war or a code of ethics like our armed forces" but "a terrorist group that has engaged in countless atrocities." The court emphasized that Ramic "hasn't disavowed terrorism"—he left ISIS not because he opposed its brutality but because he believed the group was not strict enough in applying Islamic principles.

Critically, the Sixth Circuit warned of the real-world consequences of failing to adequately incapacitate terrorists, citing the Old Dominion shooting as an example of what happens when "courts' refusals to incapacitate terrorists for a long period of time" lead to "deadly consequences." The court noted that upon release, Ramic "would still be capable of launching future attacks" and that his military training from ISIS means he "poses a heightened risk of future dangerousness."

V. THE IMPERATIVE FOR ACTION

These cases are not abstractions. They represent concrete, deadly failures of a system that is supposed to ensure that the privilege of American citizenship is conferred only on those who genuinely embrace our values, respect our laws, and are committed to our constitutional order.

Mirsad Ramic was a man who, at his own naturalization ceremony, refused to take the oath of allegiance and cursed nonbelievers. If that does not constitute a failure to demonstrate "attachment to the principles of the Constitution," then the words of the statute have lost all meaning. Mohamed Bailor Jalloh was a naturalized citizen and convicted ISIS supporter who, because of limitations in our denaturalization laws, was allowed to remain in this country and ultimately murder an American soldier on a college campus.

We must act on multiple fronts. First, we must strengthen the front end of the naturalization process to ensure that adjudicators are conducting meaningful, substantive inquiries into whether applicants genuinely satisfy the statutory requirements—not merely processing paperwork. The oath of allegiance must be taken seriously, and applicants who demonstrate hostility to American principles must be denied – and every one of them should be thoroughly and uncomfortably tested for such hostility.

Second, we must ensure that denaturalization remains a viable and vigorous tool for correcting errors and addressing fraud. Operations Janus and Second Look revealed the scope of the problem. The work they began must continue, and the Department of Justice must be given the resources and the mandate to pursue denaturalization cases aggressively. Sadly, we have barely scratched the surface of this problem, as while Operations Janus and Second Look identified many questionable cases, only a fraction of them were thoroughly followed up.

Third, we must close the legal gaps that prevented the denaturalization of individuals like Mohamed Bailor Jalloh. The current five-year window in which terrorist activity constitutes prima facie evidence of fraudulent procurement is too narrow. Legislative proposals such as the SCAM Act, which would extend this window to ten years and create new legal pathways for denaturalizing individuals involved in terrorist attacks, deserve this Committee's serious consideration. Frankly, I don't know why there would be a time limit on something as anti-American as terrorism or defrauding American governments.

And remember – the Constitution entrusts Congress with plenary authority over immigration and naturalization, including substantial discretion to prescribe the procedures by which non-citizens may seek admission, naturalization, or relief from

removal, consistent with the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. This is a problem that you – Congress – can solve, and I would urge you to do so.

American citizenship must mean something. It must reflect a genuine commitment to this country, to every single principle reflected in our Constitution, and to the principles of liberty, equality, and self-governance that define us as a nation. When we cheapen citizenship by conferring it on those who have not earned it—or worse, on those who are hostile to everything it represents—we do a disservice to every immigrant who has taken the oath in good faith, to every native-born citizen, and to the nation itself.

I look forward to hearing from the other witnesses today and to working with you all to ensure that the naturalization process is worthy of the citizenship it confers.

Thank you.