

Sen. Susan M. Collins
Windham Citizenship Ceremony
May 27, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Pelletier. Distinguished guests, families, and friends, I am delighted to join you for this celebration. To all who became new citizens of the United States of America today, I offer my hearty congratulations and a warm welcome to our national family as you become part of the greatest nation on earth.

I especially want to thank American Legion Auxiliary Unit 148 for hosting this ceremony. The essay by Anne Libby and the singing by the Windham Primary School chorus are wonderful additions to this celebration. I can think of no better civics lesson for students on what it means to be an American. As the inscription on the Statue of Liberty reminds us, we are a nation that offers a welcome to those who yearn to breathe free.

I appreciate the connection between this citizenship ceremony and Memorial Day. This day of solemn gratitude is a powerful reminder that our freedom is a gift that has been purchased at the greatest possible price. As a Marine and as a citizen, Robert Atkins demonstrates the values that have guided the brave men and women of our armed forces throughout our nation's history.

Those who became American citizens today come from 17 countries, near and far, from Canada to the Congo. Some came here to work, some to join their families, some to escape oppression. All will have freedom and opportunity. That is the guarantee America makes to its citizens. But it is up to you, as it is to each of us, what you make of the tremendous opportunity to be American.

All of our new citizens have reached this moment by conducting themselves as good citizens. They have learned about our Constitution and system of government. They have taken an oath of allegiance to that Constitution and to the laws of the United States. They have pledged to defend America against all enemies. That's a lot, but there is more.

All too often, those of us who were so fortunate to be born in America take our blessings for granted. New citizens, and the difficulties and even dangers many faced to come here, are a valuable reminder of how precious our birthright is.

True American citizenship is about much more than being born in the right place or taking an examination. It is about coming together to strengthen our nation and our communities. American citizenship is defined by service to others.

Certainly, serving in our armed forces is a powerful demonstration of citizenship. So too are running for public office or offering your talents to the various boards and committees of local government.

But there are many other ways to measure citizenship. Volunteering to help with youth sports, scouting, civic organizations, and charities makes our communities better. Stepping

forward to help feed the hungry, comfort the sick, or befriend the lonely are great acts of citizenship. Speaking out whenever human rights are denied and human dignity diminished reflect good citizenship.

Getting involved and taking action are at the heart of the American spirit. That spirit was born on July 4th, 1776, when 56 patriots gathered in Philadelphia. The document before them, the Declaration of Independence, had been crafted with care and forged by vigorous debate. All that remained was to sign it. With a great army massed against their rebellion, and with their own deaths the price of failure, they did sign it. They valued their lives, but they valued freedom more.

They gave birth to a nation founded upon the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the two centuries since, generations of Americans have risen to the defense of those rights. From that day in 1776 to this day in 2016, freedom has had a home and a defender.

America's founders could not create a perfect nation. Instead, they created a nation that empowers those who seek to advance liberty and equal rights for all. We honor their genius every time we cast a ballot, every time we speak our minds without fear, every time we engage in thoughtful and respectful debate, every time free men and women band together to bring about peaceful change. The founders created more than a system of government; they created a philosophy of self-governance that has withstood the test of time.

That philosophy, and the democratic principles it embraces, are what hold us together today. We are a people of many races, cultures, and religions, but we are a country united by those principles. Our unity has been shaken in trying times throughout our history, but our commitment has given us the strength to resolve our differences, to evolve, and to grow as a society and as a democracy.

To be an American, whether by birth or by choice, is a precious gift. As citizens of this good nation, we can all be proud of our heritage and confident in our future. We will always believe that freedom is the hope and the future of every land. We Americans will always stand together to do what is right, and to lend a hand to those in need. It is an honor to welcome these new citizens to this great cause, and I congratulate you all.