

UNC System President Peter Hans
Speech to new U.S. citizens
North Carolina 4th of July Festival Naturalization Ceremony, Southport, NC
July 3, 2024

Good afternoon, and welcome! It's an honor to be with you all, and always good to be home.

On more than one occasion during my career in public service, I have raised my right hand before witnesses and sworn to serve my state and my country. My parents were born in America, and their parents were born in America, and I have loved this nation with every fiber of my being for as long as I can remember.

And as of this afternoon, I am honored to say that I am exactly as much of an American as all of you — that my citizenship in the United States of America stands perfectly equal to yours. Nothing could make me prouder.

That's the extraordinary strength and promise of this country — that it isn't based on blood or soil or even shared history. America is an idea, and a challenging one. It's a commitment to freedom and democracy, to cherishing your own rights and respecting everyone else's. It's a promise to pursue life, liberty and happiness — and bless your neighbor as he does the same. America is something you can join, an ideal you can freely adopt, an obligation you can choose to shoulder.

I am grateful every day for the gift of being born here. But I'm even more grateful that this country inspired all of you to join up, to swear an oath and stand squarely alongside your fellow citizens as Americans full and true. It's a privilege to welcome you and your families, to honor the many different roads and reasons that brought you here, and to wish you all the blessings of peace and comfort in this land we now share.

Among the many rights and responsibilities you're about to assume, you'll get to dive headlong into the endless arguments, roiling debates and intense disagreements about what this country means and what it should become.

I am the president of North Carolina's sixteen public universities, so I know a thing or two about endless arguments. I've often joked that colleges and universities are some of the most proudly American institutions in our society, because nobody in higher education can agree about anything at all. People at the university live to argue and compete, to debate everything under the sun and then get up tomorrow and do it again.

Some days it feels like competing factions want to pull the place apart, just as it can feel that way in our country at times. Conflict is noisy. It can be stressful and unnerving. It can look and sound and feel like the very opposite of unity.

But, miraculously enough, that churning spirit of conflict is what creates the spark of progress — it's the energy that drives us. At the university, our highest goal is to pursue truth, to discover new knowledge and expand our understanding of the world. We do that by letting people test new ideas, follow their curiosity, and argue out competing theories as best they can. It's messy, but it works.

And it works precisely because there's no all-powerful human authority to impose one way of thinking, to insist on a single way of viewing the world. No university leader has that power — I certainly don't! — and thank God for that.

In our democratic republic, the highest goal is for free and equal citizens to pursue their vision of a good and meaningful life, to make room for everyone to pursue happiness as they define it.

We do that by preserving the peace and liberty people need to follow different ambitions, to explore different ways of living, to follow their hearts and do what they think is best for their families and their communities. It's messy, but it works. And it works precisely because there's no all-powerful national authority to impose one way of living, to enforce a single answer to the big questions that life demands of us all. No politician has that power and thank God for that, too. Those timeless, deeply philosophical questions are for all of us to decide.

The Harvard historian Jill Lepore writes of an America held together by the strength of its ideas and the force of its disagreements. "A nation founded on universal ideas will never stop fighting over the meaning of its past or the direction of its future," she writes. "That doesn't mean the past or future is meaningless, or directionless, or that anyone can afford to sit out the fight. The nation, as ever, is the fight."

To be an American means to tolerate, even welcome, that fight. It means learning to disagree forcefully but peacefully. It means embracing the fight without ever losing sight of our shared love of this nation, without letting our divisions undermine our civic devotion.

My guess, as we all stand here today, is that I hold major differences with many of you. Differences over matters of faith, about questions of public policy, about the all-important culture-war issue of whether eastern or western-style barbecue is more quintessentially North Carolinian. Some of you, may God forgive you, could even be fans of Duke basketball.

And still — you are my fellow citizens, my brothers and sisters in democracy, my compatriots in this grand experiment we call America. Our disagreements are small compared to our shared devotion to this country, and to the discipline of democracy. I cherish that connection with all of you; I take real joy in it. And I hope the same will be true for you.

Next year, our public universities will launch a requirement called the Foundations of American Democracy, mandating that every college student study some of the essential texts of American

citizenship. This has, of course, been the subject of significant debate within the university. As I mentioned, Americans and academics love to argue about everything, so we've had a whole series of intense and interesting discussions about what should be included, how it should be taught, and what counts as foundational in the canon of American civic life. There is nothing more American than arguing about democracy.

Here's where we've landed: every student will need to spend time reading and debating the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers — documents that established our system of government and gave shape to our national life. These are clearly foundational — you all had to learn the workings of the Constitution and the key points of the American Revolution as part of the citizenship process, and it seems only right that our college graduates should know it, too.

But crucially, every student will also be required to spend time with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation; with Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from a Birmingham Jail; and with other great works that mark our nation's long and never-finished effort to form a more perfect union. They will learn that this nation is not faultless, and never has been. But it possesses the remarkable capacity for self-criticism and self-correction, a fundamental drive to fulfill the worthy promises of its founding.

I want our students to be restless patriots — I want them to have a clear-eyed hope about the future of this nation, and a vital sense of their role in securing it. I want them to embrace the righteous work of improving this country and living up to its idealistic demands.

Citizenship, as I think of it, is more than just a legal status or a set of rights, important as those things are. Citizenship is a discipline, something you learn and commit to. And nobody in this country understands that better than those of you taking the oath of citizenship today. "I take this obligation freely" — those are powerful words, and a powerful reminder that true citizenship is not a right bestowed, but a responsibility chosen.

Because you all understand this so well; because you have done the enormously hopeful thing of coming to this country and making your life anew; and because I so badly want a rising generation of Americans to share the faith that you all have placed in this nation, I hope that you'll speak proudly and often about becoming a citizen of the United States. Your story is part of the American story now, and I hope you'll share it with your friends, your neighbors, your colleagues, and with every young person and student you ever encounter in your life.

"This nation is young yet," wrote a great North Carolinian named John Ehle. "She is still new and unfinished, and even now America is man's greatest adventure in time and space."

I agree. That restless desire to shape this place for the better, the earnest faith in the promise of America — that's what I want for all of our people, and what I welcome in all of you.



Thank you for letting me stand alongside you — not just today, but for however long we share the blessings of this great country. It's an honor, and I'm grateful to you.