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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AT THE  
NATURALIZATION CEREMONY  
AT MONTICELLO

11:25 A.M. EDT

Governor Godwin, Mr. Justice Powell, Senator Byrd, Ambassador Nolting, Reverend Clergy, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a very great honor and a high privilege, Governor Godwin, to come to the Commonwealth of Virginia and to this beautiful and significant home and to participate in this wonderful ceremony. It is a great honor and privilege for me to be here today.

I am very proud to welcome all of you as fellow citizens of the United States of America. I invite you to join fully in the American adventure and to share our common goal and our common glory.

Our common goal is freedom -- the liberty of each individual to enjoy the equal rights and to pursue the happiness which in this life God gives and self-government secures.

Our common glory is the great heritage from the past which enriches the present and insures our future.

In 1884, France, as a birthday gift, presented the United States with a statue -- the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. This year scores of friendly nations have sent us Bicentennial gifts which we deeply appreciate and will long cherish.

But you have given us a birthday present beyond price -- yourselves, your faith, your loyalty, and your love. We thank you with full and friendly hearts.

After two centuries, there is still something wonderful about being an American. If we cannot quite express it, we know what it is. You know what it is or you would not be here today. Why not just call it patriotism?

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Thomas Jefferson was a Virginia planter, a politician, a philosopher, a practical problem-solver, a Palladian architect, a poet in prose. With such genius he became a Burgess, a delegate, a Governor, an Ambassador, a Secretary of State, a Vice President, and President of the United States. But, he was first a patriot.

The American patriots of 1776 who pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to declare and defend our independence did more than dissolve their ties with another country to protest against the abuses of their liberties.

Jefferson and his colleagues very deliberately and very daringly set out to construct a new kind of nation. "Men may be trusted," he said, "to govern themselves without a master." This was the most revolutionary idea in the world at that time. It remains the most revolutionary idea in the world today.

Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and all patriots who laid the foundation for freedom in our Declaration and our Constitution carefully studied both contemporary and classic models of Government to adapt them to the American climate and our circumstances.

Just as Jefferson did in designing Monticello, they wanted to build in this beautiful land a home for equal freedom and opportunity, a haven of safety and happiness, not for themselves alone, but for all who would come to us through centuries.

How well they built is told by millions upon millions who came and are still coming. Our first national census in 1790 produced a recorded population just under four million. Three-fourths of them traced their ancestry to the British Isles, though most had considered themselves Americans for several generations.

There was already talk about further immigration, proposing it should be selective and restrictive, but this was swept aside by the greatest mass movement of people in all human history.

Immigrants came from almost everywhere, singly and in waves. Throughout our first century they brought the restless drive for better lives and rugged strength that cleared the wilderness, plowed the prairie, tamed the western plains, pushing on into the Pacific and to Alaska.

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Like the Mayflower Pilgrims and the early Spanish settlers, these new Americans brought with them precious relics of the worlds they left behind -- a song, a story, a dance, a tool, a seed, a recipe, the name of a place, the rules of a game, a trick of the trade.

Such transfusions of traditions and cultures, as well as of blood, have made Americans unique among nations and Americans a new kind of people. There is little the world has that is not native to the United States today. Unfettered by ancient hates, the people of the young United States really believed that all men are created equal.

We admit they had stubborn blind spots in their lofty vision -- for blacks, whose forebearer had been Americans almost as long as theirs -- and for women, whose political rights we took even longer to recognize.

This is not the day, however, to deplore our shortcomings or to regret that not all new citizens have been welcomed as you are here today. The essential fact is that the United States -- as a national policy and in the hearts of most Americans -- has been willing to absorb anyone from anywhere.

We were confident that simply by sharing our American adventure these newcomers would become loyal, law-abiding, productive citizens, and they did. Older nations in the 18th and 19th centuries granted their nationality to foreign born only as a special privilege, if at all. We offered citizenship to all, and we have been richly rewarded.

The United States was able to do this because we are uniquely a community of values as distinct from a religious community, a racial community, a geographic community or an ethnic community. This nation was founded 200 years ago, not on ancient legends or conquests or physical likeness or language, but on a certain political value which Jefferson's pen so eloquently expressed.

To be an American is to subscribe to those opinions which the Declaration of Independence proclaims and the Constitution protects: The political values of self-government, liberty and justice, equal rights and equal opportunity.

These beliefs are the secrets of America's unity from diversity -- in my judgment the most magnificent achievement of our 200 years as a nation. "Black is beautiful" was a motto of genius which uplifted us far above its intention. Once Americans had thought about it and perceived its truth, we began to realize that so are brown, white, red and yellow beautiful. When I was young, a Sunday school teacher told us that the beauty of Joseph's coat was in its many colors. I believe Americans are beautiful -- individually, in communities, and freely joined together, by dedication to the United States of America.

I see a growing danger in this country to conformity of thought and taste and behavior. We need more encouragement and protection for individuality. The wealth we have of culture, ethnic and religious and racial traditions, are valuable counterbalances to the overpowering sameness and subordination of totalitarian societies.

The sense of belonging to any group that stands for something decent and noble so long as it does not confine free spirits or cultivate hostility to others, is part of the pride every American should have in the heritage of the past.

That heritage is rooted now, not in England alone -- as indebted as we are for the Magna Carta and the Common Law -- not in Europe alone, or in Africa alone, or Asia or on the islands of the sea. The American adventure draws from the best of all of mankind's long sojourn here on Earth and now reaches out into the solar system.

You came as strangers among us and you leave here as citizens, equal in fundamental rights, equal before the law with an equal share in the promise of the future.

Jefferson did not define what the pursuit of happiness means for you or for me. Our Constitution does not guarantee that any of us will find it. But we are free to try.

Foreigners like Lafayette, Von Steuben and Pulaski came to fight in our Revolution because they believed in its principles that they felt were universal. Immigrants like Andrew Carnegie came as a poor boy and created a great steel industry, then gave his fortune back to America for libraries, universities and museums. Maria Francesca Cabrini came as a missionary Sister to serve the sick and the poor. Samuel Gompers worked in a sweatshop, spent his lunchtime helping other immigrant workers learn to read so they could become citizens. We have gained far, far more than we have given to the millions who made America their second homeland.

Remember that none of us are more than caretakers of this great country. Remember that the more freedom you give to others, the more you will have for yourself. Remember that without law there can be no liberty.

And remember, as well, the rich treasures you brought from whence you came, and let us share your pride in them.

This is the way that we keep our independence as exciting as the day it was declared and keep the United States of America even more beautiful than Joseph's coat.

Thank you very much.

END (AT 11:37 A.M. EDT)