

5-2-1988

Naturalization Ceremony: Dutchess County Bar Association

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Recommended Citation

Miner '56, Roger J., "Naturalization Ceremony: Dutchess County Bar Association" (1988). *Naturalization Ceremonies*. 1.
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Naturalization Ceremony
Dutchess County
May 2, 1988

MY FELLOW CITIZENS: It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to participate in this Naturalization Ceremony.

Many naturalized Americans, including my own grandparents, have expressed to me their feelings of pride and accomplishment upon attaining the long cherished goal of citizenship; I am sure your feelings are no different, that this occasion is a joyous one for each of you, and that this day will be the most memorable of your lives.

This ceremony presents an opportunity for all Americans, naturalized and native born alike, to re-examine and renew our dedication to the principles upon which our Republic was founded and under which it has flourished since the beginning. For these principles, not our material accomplishments, great as they have been, assure our nation its place in history.

More than two centuries ago the American colonists, citing oppression as the cause, and natural law as their authority, declared their independence from the British Crown. In the Declaration of Independence they charged the British Monarch with a "long train of abuses and usurpations" including the following: "He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that reason obstructing Laws for the Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of land."

Yes, my fellow citizens, the restriction upon immigration and naturalization was one of the causes of the American Revolution!

After independence, it became necessary for the American colonists to forge a new government and to set the course for a new nation. The result of their work was the American Constitution and Bill of Rights, to which we refer today, years after their adoption, for definitions of our rights, privileges and obligations as citizens of the United States of America. It is true that ours is a government of laws and not of men, but every law must comply with the requirements of our Constitution, as must every elected and appointed officer of our government. The ultimate power, of course, is in the people: Even the Constitution can be changed, if our citizens desire it so, and there have been amendments to the Constitution over the years. Many of these amendments have served to expand the basic rights of our people. Our Constitution marked the first time in history that a written Constitution specified that certain rights of the people were beyond the authority of the government to infringe or violate. Our Constitution ensures that government is the tool of the people and that people are not the tools of the government; it not only protects the rights of the majority but of the minority of our citizens as well.

But the citizens of this nation have enjoyed individual freedom and individual liberty, not only because our rights are written in the Constitution and laws of our country, but because they are indelibly inscribed in the hearts of the people.

Generations have worked, strived, fought and died to preserve these freedoms and liberties for future generations. Americans are realistic. We recognize that ours is an imperfect society and that those who lead us in government are sometimes not as perfect as we would like them to be. What we do not recognize, and what we do not concede, is that our structure, our form of government, will ever permit us to stop striving for improvement. We do not admit, we do not concede, that our system will permit any less than the full realization of every citizen's potential. We have an obligation to each other to practice our form of government, to participate in it; we have an obligation to inform ourselves on the vital issues facing our nation -- to study, listen, read, criticize, praise, support, discuss and vote -- in sum, to exercise the duties of citizenship. And there are many vital issues which will occupy you as American citizens, just as those who have gone before you have been occupied with other vital issues confronting our nation. You will need to be concerned with establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity -- the same concerns described by our founding fathers in the preamble to the Constitution.

I ask that you bear the obligations of citizenship in mind as you go forth to exercise and enjoy your rights as American Citizens -- the freedoms of speech, religion and press; the right

to be secure in your homes and free from unlawful search and seizure; the right to a free public education; the right to travel freely throughout the land; the requirement of legal cause for arrest; the right of trial by jury; the restrictions on government interference in your daily lives; the freedom to pursue a calling of your choice; the right to raise your children as you choose. But in exercising these rights and privileges, always be conscious of the same rights and privileges in your fellow Americans. Have respect for our laws; strive to change those which you think are bad; support those which you think are good, but obey them all -- obedience to law is the first obligation of citizenship. Indeed, the oath which you have just taken is similar to the one taken by the President of the United States, for his obligation, your obligation and the obligation of every American citizen is the same -- to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the laws under which we live.

You are now part of American history, the most recent troop in the long procession of those who have made our nation what it is today. You should be generous to those who follow you in this procession, because the history of immigration is the history of America. Although the Constitution gives to Congress the authority to regulate immigration to this country and the naturalization of new citizens, American policy in this area was established early by our first President, George Washington. He said: "The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and

persecuted of all nations and religions, whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment." A more recent President, John F. Kennedy, wrote a book entitled "A Nation of Immigrants." In arguing for congressional enactment of greatly liberalized immigration laws he said: "Immigration policy should be generous; it should be fair; it should be flexible. With such a policy we can turn to the world and to our own past with clean hands and a clean conscience. Such a policy would be but a reaffirmation of old principles."

Professor Oscar Handlin, the Harvard University historian, has written:

"To assess the contributions of immigrants to the civilization of the United States is difficult, because, in the largest sense, the history of immigration is the history of America. Every inhabitant of the country is either himself a newcomer or a descendant of an ancestor who arrived from elsewhere. Generation after generation of wanderers shaped the national experience.

"They helped to settle the continent; they developed the industry of the country; they confirmed the pluralism and freedom of American society; they made substantial contributions to the transfer of culture from the Old to the New World.

"They too, by their willingness to risk migration and their capacity to work and endure, helped to bring the promised but undeveloped land in which they arrived into a place of prominence

in the World. In good measure, its economy and its society were a product of their efforts."

We now look forward to your contributions to our society.

E PLURIBUS UNUM -- We are one -- but we are from many. We are one nation but we come from many nations. Remember the nations of your origin but be loyal to this nation above all others.

FELLOW CITIZENS: We face the future together -- one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. The American heritage is now your heritage. May we all be worthy of it.