

35th Annual Naturalization Keynote

11:00 A.M. JULY 4, 1997

ADDRESS BY GENERAL COLIN L. POWELL

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you, Governor Allen, for that very kind introduction.

Mr. Jordan, General Shea, Judge Thomas, distinguished guests, and those gathered here before us who will soon be citizens of these United States.

I am your last hurdle to citizenship!

I wonder if you realize how remarkable this ceremony is. Even though such ceremonies happen regularly around the country, it is still, nonetheless, remarkable.

It is remarkable because there is no other country on the face of the earth where such a diverse group of men and women, natives of faraway nations, could come together to swear their allegiance to a new nation that will become their home forever.

See before us this morning Russians, Indians, Jamaicans, Englishmen, Australians, Ukrainians, Saudis, Kuwaitis, Iranians, Pakistanis, Costa Ricans, Jordanians, Mexicans, Cubans, Koreans, Greeks, Zimbabweans, Spaniards, Dominicans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Salvadorans, Laotians, Moroccans, Argentines, Frenchmen, Japanese, Kenyans—all, who in just a few more moments will become Americans.

There is no other country in the world that has opened its arms to embrace the dreams and aspirations of humankind. This is our history, this is our tradition, this is the source of our strength.

America's greatness has been achieved by the many waves of immigrants who have come to this land since the Pilgrims first came ashore so many years ago. America has been enriched by the talents, cultures, languages, and values brought here over the centuries. It is this joining together of diverse people that has made us so durable and resilient a society—just as a bridge cable gets its strength from its many strands of wire woven together for a common purpose.

And in pursuit of our common purpose, you are not asked to abandon your origins or ignore the ties of affinity that you have to your native land.

You will keep your roots and from them draw nourishment that you will give to your new land. Nowhere else on earth can this miracle of assimilation be witnessed with such vibrancy and profusion. Seventy-seven years ago, a short, little brown-skinned man stepped off a banana boat in Philadelphia. He was from Jamaica. He was a laborer. He hadn't finished high school. He told the authorities he came to America to go to mechanics school, not exactly true.

His name was Luther Powell.

Three years later, a short, beautiful brown-skinned lady named Maude Ariel McKoy stepped off a slightly better boat, named the Turlalba, at Ellis Island. She was also a Jamaican. She was a high school graduate and told the authorities she was a nurse, also not quite true.

But as my 93-year-old aunt tells me in hushed whispers, "Colin, you had to tell them something like that so they'd let you in."

Luther and Maude came to America because it was a place of hope, a place of opportunity, a place where your dreams and your willingness to work hard were your only limitations.

It wasn't a perfect place, especially for brown or black-skinned people, but it was, oh, so much better than any other place.

Luther and Maude met and married and in ceremonies perhaps not as grand as this, they, too, took their oaths to their new home, America.

They had two children who became very successful in life, one as a soldier, the other as a teacher.

They gave their children many things that led to that success. Above all, they gave them a value system that rested on an understanding of the difference between right and wrong and a sense of shame.

A value system based on a belief in God, in hard work and education, in self-esteem, and above all, in a love for their chosen country, America, which had given them so very much.

In one generation the fondest hopes and dreams of my immigrant parents were met and surpassed.

And so it has been for over two hundred years, in glorious cycles, another of which begins again this afternoon, here at Monticello.

And what more wonderful place for it to happen. Monticello, Little Mountain, a place forever known as the beloved home of the man who captured in words, better than anyone before or since, the essence of what makes America special. Why America still draws hopeful people from around the world.

Thomas Jefferson was at once a simple man and one of enormous complexity. He was an architect, a politician, a philosopher, a diplomat, an inventor, to name just a few of his many talents.

He left us so very much. But this brilliant man in his own simple epitaph asked to be remembered as the

man who wrote the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, as the Father of the University of Virginia and as the Author of the Declaration of American Independence.

It is the Declaration of Independence that will always be remembered as his greatest work, even though he was not the only author, but he certainly was the guiding spirit of it. The Declaration was a political document telling the world why these United States ought to be free and why they were leaving the British Empire.

Most Americans have not read the entire Declaration.

Earlier, Judge Thomas read the Preamble, or opening paragraph, of the Declaration. I remember having to memorize the Preamble when I was in elementary school.

And near the beginning of the Preamble are two simple soaring sentences that are known to every American.

Two sentences that are the very breath of our national life. Two sentences that have come across 221 years with not the slightest loss of power or significance.

Two sentences that inspire the world as if they had been written yesterday. We hold these truths to be self-evident, they need no proof or explanation. They are obvious. And they are truths, not assumptions or hypothesis.

"All men are created equal," five words, 21 letters, a revolutionary thought for the time. Five words that still throw the light of democracy into the darkest corners of tyranny and oppression.

"That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," these are rights granted by no king or president or judge or congress. They are rights that come to us as a birthright from God.

"That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Life—to be free from violence and tyranny. To be safe in our homes. Liberty—to be free to choose those who govern us and free to choose our own destiny in life. The pursuit of happiness—to seek that which brings us worth and satisfaction in life, limited only by our own talents and ambition.

All of that in one sentence. The second sentence is even shorter. "That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." No definition of democracy has ever improved upon that sentence.

The Declaration was adopted in Congress assembled in Philadelphia 221 years ago today. Fifty years later to the day, on July 4th, 1826, its author, Thomas Jefferson, died here at Monticello.

The Declaration spoke of a world that did not yet exist. Slaves helped build this place. They were neither free nor considered equal. But the words of the Declaration proclaimed a vision that has kept us moving ever since towards a more just and perfect union ever since.

You become citizens today in the shadow of profound greatness.

And now it is your turn to become heirs to this dream and to do your part in seeking that more perfect

union.

In a few minutes you will be presented your Certificate of Citizenship. You have worked hard for it. You have looked forward to this day.

In the presence of your governor, you will also become citizens of the great Commonwealth of Virginia.

The oath you are about to take will require you to assume the responsibilities of citizenship. You will be asked to support and defend the Constitution, to bear arms if necessary and to perform national service if necessary.

Beyond these requirements of the oath, there are other obligations of citizenship,

- To raise strong families with law-abiding, God-fearing children who will become our future leaders and the keepers of the flame of liberty.
- To work hard and support yourselves and your families and to contribute to the common needs of your communities through your taxes and your generosity.
- To participate in the political process that fuels our democratic system. First of all, to vote for those who will govern you. This is one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of a citizen.
- To keep yourselves informed about the issues of the day. Read and watch the news. We must give our political leaders our informed consent.
- Be joiners. Join your PTA, your school board, a place of worship, neighborhood associations, run for political office if that is your inclination.
- Be a good neighbor. Serve your community. Give some part of your time, talent and treasure to help those in your community who are in need. Make sure that you reach down and back. There are volunteers here today who will show you how to do it.
- But what we want from you most of all, and what I suspect we already have, is for you to love America. To be proud of being citizens.
- Pursue your dreams. Take care of your new country. Travel your American journey.

The motto of the United States is “E Pluribus Unum,” out of many, one.

You have been the many, and now it is the time to make you the one.

Welcome. Congratulations to each of you and to your very happy families.

God bless you and God bless America.