

## 44th Annual Naturalization Keynote

ARCHITECT

I.M. Pei

July 4, 2005

I have no prepared address for you tonight — today. But this is an occasion that I was asked to be present two years ago by Adele Chatfield-Taylor. I couldn't resist it, for reasons you will soon know.

The first time I was acquainted with Thomas Jefferson was when I was in school, studying architecture. And, of course, Monticello was everywhere. And yet Jefferson was not an architect. And that amazed me.

So I can't claim to know too much about Jefferson, because there are so many Jefferson scholars here today. But I can tell you that back in the 1930s, in the late '30s, I read a book — I don't find it anymore — describing Jefferson's travels in France. There he studied not just architecture, which he knew better than all of us, but he was also interested in food and wine. Ah, there is a man of culture. Ever since then he has been in my heart.

I say here is a man any one of us, especially architects, like to emulate. So I do have a connection with this great man. And that connection started late, perhaps, because I came to America 71 years ago. I want to tell you something about that experience of mine, because I think it may be appropriate. Some of you — I hear there are 75 of you here today.

I left Shanghai in 1935 on a boat called President Coolidge. It took us 18 days to cross the Pacific. But the last day I didn't sleep. I was on deck, watching; watching for San Francisco Bay. And when it appeared is a moment I tell you I have never experienced again, a moment of great joy, expectation, excitement. I was alone in some ways, because my family was not with me, but I felt very much part of something already.

Now, the name of the island, if I remember correctly, is called Angel Island, where I landed. Not Ellis Island, where many of you probably came. But it could be Devil's Island and my reaction would have been the same. That sense of joy is unbelievable and difficult to describe.

Now, since then, I was very lucky, because in those days to be an American citizen was very, very difficult, much more difficult than today, I think. And we labor here, my wife and I, labor through the war, because there was a war going on. And I couldn't return to my native country because there too — there too was a war going on.

So not until 1954 I was received — my application was accepted. And there were 5,000 of us, not 75, in Polo Grounds in New York.

Now, speeches were longer than this. And after the — they had me taking the oath of application of citizenship and then pledge the allegiance to the flag and sang the national anthem. At the end of that, believe it or not, there were several minutes of silence, absolute silence. None of us expected that, because that was a moment of great emotion for all. Applause came after that. It was thundering, because Polo Grounds is a big place and there were many of us. And many of them were refugees from Europe.

Now, that experience does compare in some ways to yours. Time has changed. The place, however, is different. My experience in the Polo Grounds is in an arena, a big, big place. Yours is here, as in the hallowed grounds of Thomas Jefferson. How lucky are you?

So not only can you think of your individual experience to compare with mine, but you also will not forget that you received your citizenship here at Monticello.

Before Jefferson took office in 1800 or 1801, he was not entirely in favor of immigration, because the country was small then. So it saw a wave of people coming from different cultures, different forms of government. It might disrupt this nation. Very, very thoughtful idea.

Because soon afterwards, after he retired from presidency, even during presidency, he asserted the rights of citizenship in 1801 as a law of nation, as he called it. And then I remember in 1806 he thought and he wrote, I think, about the — that it is expatriation — which means immigration, I guess — is also a natural thing to happen in that world at that time, very early, 200 years ago. And in 1821, in his autobiography, he reasserted again and again the right of expatriation. So, therefore, you have that to remember, the man, as well as your own history.

I feel very, very proud today to be here for the same reason I just mentioned to you, because I'm also with you at Monticello.

Thank you very much.

