

45th Annual Naturalization Keynote

It's wonderful to be here and a privilege, indeed, to congratulate you, the heroes of the moment in the great work of making and sustaining a government that derives its authority from individual liberty. My father came to this country from Scotland via England, and became a citizen. He knew beforehand that the ceremony was going to be a significant event. Even so, he wasn't prepared for the emotional power it had for him. He became a citizen in a group like this, neither very large nor very small. The ceremony's power multiplied with their numbers. Everyone in his batch of new citizens was moved for themselves, my father included, but they were all overwhelmed by each other, new members of a centuries old tide of migration here to the 'empire of liberty'. It lifted them out of what we mistakenly call ordinary life into the realization that properly understood, life is grand opera, as one is sometimes made aware by a wedding, or the birth of a child.

Something like that, momentous and every-day, is afoot here. Brand new Americans are being made, and I'm delighted to be here to celebrate my father's becoming an American citizen through your becoming American citizens, and your becoming American citizens through celebrating him, and through all of you, the rest of us, who were lucky to be given what you reached for and took. It's delightful. We are all lucky, the old citizens in what we got for free, and you, the ones, in knowing what it's worth. We have a lot to tell one another. Congratulations. Bravo. Yay. The conversation begins now.

Monticello is a beautiful spot for this, full as it is of the spirit that animated this country's foundation: boldness, vision, improvisation, practicality, inventiveness and imagination, the kind of cheekiness that only comes with free-thinking and faith in an individual's ability to change the face of the world — it's easy to imagine Jefferson saying to himself, "So what if I've never designed a building before? If I want to, I will.") — to make something brand new out of the elements of an old culture, be it English Common Law or Palladian Architecture. With its slave quarters and history, it's also a healthy reminder that our old country, your new country, for all its glory, has always had feet of clay, and work that needed doing. So it's good that you've come, fresh troops and reinforcement. We old citizens could use some help.

It's a glorious day, making allowances for the heat. It's the Fourth of July, the 181st Anniversary of the deaths of the second and third Presidents of the United States, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, the individual who impertinently designed this house. It's a double birthday, of the country, and of your citizenship. A great American Supreme Court Judge, Oliver Wendell Holmes, describing a similar day, said that it looked as if "God had just spit on his sleeve and polished up the universe till you could almost see your face reflected in it."

We know all the beauty of this day wasn't arranged exclusively for those of us gathered here, we're

reasonable people, but you who are about to become citizens here, are within your rights to look at it all and see your own faces reflected there, as Justice Holmes said, because it really is a place and time made for you. You're joining a country already in motion that looks for your effect on it, so that it can better know what it needs to become, for tomorrow.

Welcome. We need you. There's much to be done.

My talk is, effectively, your graduation address, and every good graduation address begins with a call to the graduates to help the world they are entering discover its future. Consider yourselves called. And if the sea that's America looks large in comparison to the size of your ship, don't be dismayed. Let Thomas Jefferson be our example:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal". The words are so familiar, so potent, so important, so grand and fine, it's hard to believe that a person, any single person, actually wrote them, picked up a pen, dipped it in ink, and, on a blank white sheet, made appear for the first time what had never before existed in the whole history of the world. By scratching away at the page, he called a country into being, knowing as he wrote that the country was no more than an idea, and the idea might, at any instant, be erased and destroyed, and the United States of America become just another sorry footnote in the history of suppressed rebellions against tyranny.... And went on writing. You can't help but be impressed by all that that one person, and the small group of individuals around him, not much larger than your group of new citizens, won for so many.

I guess you can see where I'm headed.

Abraham Lincoln calls our government, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." I claim that the word 'people', as used there, stands for a great many individuals, rather than for a collective. It wasn't a mob, but individuals acting in a group that made this country up out of whole cloth. These are just the sort of people the country needs now, individuals acting together for the common good.

How apt, how opportune, that you should come to join us just now.

Theodore Roosevelt said, "The foundation stone of national life is, and ever must be, the high individual character of the average citizen." That understates the case: the United States — a participatory democracy is one way political scientists describe it — counts on its citizens turning out to be above average, like all the students in Lake Woebegone.

And that's where you come in.

Thomas Jefferson's idea looks pretty solid now, with all the history and highways and airports, and webs of all kinds tying us together. But for all the building and bulldozing, the wealth, and the resources, the United States is still a contract among individuals around an idea. If the saying is, 'contracts are made to be broken', we want this one to hold, which requires all hands to be on deck.

That's where you come in. You come in from Togo; Bosnia-Herzegovina; Canada and Peru;

Afghanistan, India, and Mexico; China, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom; Croatia, El Salvador, Ghana, the Philippines, and Vietnam; Argentina, Bangladesh, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Congo, Guatemala, Iran, Italy, Jamaica, Poland, Romania, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, and Turkey — The names themselves a poem about all the migrating peoples who come here. The United States may seem like a fixed star, but it isn't. It is a relationship between citizens and an idea, and, like all relationships, it changes with the people in it. Its past is always up for reargument; its present is constantly unfolding, complex, a continuum of surprises; and the future is yet to be written. A country is alive, or it's history. As long as this country endures, it will always be in search of how to understand itself and where to go from here.

That's where you come in. That's where we come in.

We all need to exercise our lungs in the discussion: what does our past mean, what are we to do now, and what will be our future? This is not a job just for the talking heads on TV and the politicians. Nor for moneyed interests, nor for single-issue movements. As the WWI recruiting poster said, "Uncle Sam needs you", needs us.

You just heard John Charles recite the three cardinal rights that no one may take from us, to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness". As newly minted citizens, they were already familiar to you.

But my question is for the rest of us, the ones who are citizens already. In the midst of the interests and pressures of our own lives, don't we leave a good deal of Life and Liberty to the Government to attend to

(fade)We are greatly mistaken to think sharing our views with the television set and our husbands and wives, and voting a little, is enough. Don't you who are new pick up these bad habits from us.

America has been marvelously able to correct its course in the past because the founding idea — of individual freedom expressed through direct representation — has stirred its citizens to participate, and interfere. Information from the people makes the government smarter. Insufficient information from us makes it dumber. Or, as Abraham Lincoln more elegantly expressed it, "Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?" Leaders, if they are wise, will be patient. But we mustn't try their patience too much. For us, finding that ultimate justice means thinking and talking until we reach it, and continuing to speak until the politicians understand it.

We may not leave it to the three branches of government to sort things out, to bring us the right questions for decision, to make the right decisions themselves.

Never has that statement been truer than now. Our national politics have stalled over a quarter of a century over very large issues, including immigration, social security, health care, and especially, since it affects the countries you've left, the country you're joining, and all the countries in between, the health of the planet. War has both parties running to extremes.

If you think the problems are not any more urgent, or the discord any worse, than normal, then, well, I

disagree, but my point remains: in our country, things are 'normal' only when your voices are clearly heard. The old model of our citizenly relation to politics was of a group of people under a tree, taking turns on the stump all day, discussing the issues of the time. The old model was the town meeting where every citizen can have their say. Old citizens like me hope that between you and the Internet the old model will get a new lease on life.

Whether you work within the Democratic or Republican parties, or join in supporting a bi-partisan ticket for 2008 as I have, in an effort to drive the parties to work together and to show them how it's done, do something.

From your first breath as an American citizen, make it known what matters to you.

We can't let ourselves become mere units of statistical analysis. It appears to be so, that if you ask any 1000 Americans their views on anything, you'll have a pretty good idea what all Americans think. You might almost conclude that individuals didn't matter at all anymore.

But then here you come in, and prove the opposite.

By individual choice and individual effort, you traveled the miles, and did the work required, to arrive here today to join the country whose whole monumental structure rests on personal freedom. Will you make yourselves content to become a mere grain of sand in a vast statistical ocean?

Don't be discouraged by the odds. It isn't all determinism and the tide of history. An individual can up-end what is determined, and speed or reverse the tide. The man on whose estate we stand, by pushing his pen across a blank page, proved that.

Besides, the science of statistics has another aspect. It appears that the most reliable way to know who will win the next election or whether the stock market will go up or down is to ask as many people as possible to make a bet about it. Their bets often tell more than all the opinions of the pundits and economists, politicians and market watchers. It turns out Lincoln was right about the 'ultimate wisdom of the people'. But here's the catch: if you don't make yourself heard, your bet can't be counted.

"Men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master," as Jefferson predicted. But will we, by our silence, indifference, or inaction, give the trust away, cede it to the wealthy, present it to the entrenched, hand it off to the government, entrust it to any process or procedure that excludes our voices? It could happen.

"As a nation of freemen," Abraham Lincoln said, "we must live through all time, or die by suicide." That's where we all come in.

As graduating citizens, you will know how the government is set up: the justly familiar separation of powers, the well-known system of checks and balances, and the famous three branches of government: the executive branch, the judicial branch, and the legislative branch. If these are the branches, what is the tree? Do not think it's the government.

We are the tree from which the government springs and spreads into its three branches. Every citizen is part of the root system, part of the trunk, no mere twig or leaf. Help our government never to forget it. We have to bring energy, action, participation, and money to the three branches, or they get no nourishment, and nothing will prevent them from becoming brittle and dry, and unfruitful.

I hope you don't waste all the time I have in figuring out how a citizen should relate to his government.

Talk to it. Tell it what you like. Tell it what you don't like. Vote, of course. Think about what you want our future to look like. Let the government know. Roll up your sleeves, stick out your chin, sharpen your elbows, get in the middle of things, make them different.

You will be bound to get a lot of things wrong. That's what we do. But the possibility of error is no excuse for being quiet, and I say this on the good authority of past Presidents:

"Man was never intended to become an oyster."

That's Theodore Roosevelt talking.

"Get action. Seize the moment," he said, and he also said, "The credit belongs to the man.... who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who... spends himself for a worthy cause"

And President Thomas Jefferson wrote,

"The evils flowing from the duperies of the people [— that is, the ignorant errors of folks like you and me —] are less injurious than those from the egoism of their agents [— that is, the arrogant errors of those who speak and act for us]."

So it turns out citizenship isn't just a great privilege and opportunity, though it is all that, it's also a job. I'm sorry to be the one to bring you this news, so late in the process. But don't worry, it's a great job. Everything that happens within this country politically, and everywhere in the world its influence is felt, falls within its province. It's a job with a lot of scope. You'll never be able to complain again about being bored at work. As we multiply our individual voices, we multiply the chances for our country's success. Which is where we all come in.

May your initiation here be a reminder to us all to put the participation back into 'participatory democracy'.

May all our citizenship be individual, unflagging, and vocal, and may our old country, your new country, so prosper.

There's lots to do. All hands on deck. Members of the class of 2007: Congratulations. God bless you. Let us hear from you.