

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506



NATURALIZATION CEREMONY

**United States Court of the District of Columbia
Judge Norma Johnson, Presiding**

REMARKS BY

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Acting Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities**

March 12, 1985

SSSSSSSS

There's a patriotic hymn that American school children sometime sing that may strike you, if you hear it or sing it, as strange. It contains the lines, "land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountain side, let freedom ring."

Now, we all know, your fathers did not die in this land. They may have lived and died in Europe, or in Asia, or in Africa or Latin America, but they were not from here. It is because they lived and died elsewhere that you are, today, a part of this ceremony.

But, in a perfectly real sense, the song is true; you do have fathers who once did live and die here. In 1776 a small group of Americans risked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to say before the world that all men were created equal -- whether they were English or Jew, German or Slav -- and because of that, that all men were endowed with certain inalienable rights. This country began as an idea -- the idea, as Abraham Lincoln said, that through our free institutions all of us might have equal chance in the race of life, with all its aspirations. This idea, he told us, was our birthright. This was not an idea for a few, or for some, but for all. The fathers of this country broadcast this idea abroad, and insisted on it here. You are the proof that they meant it.

So, in a real way, the song is not wrong at all, our fathers did die here. Over 200 years ago, these Americans -- immigrants and children of immigrants themselves -- chose us to be their children long before we could choose them. Moreover, they not only chose us but they allowed us to share in their inheritance -- in this life of equal liberty. Not only did they not exclude us -- Italians and Poles and Vietnamese, they singularly included us: All men are created equal, endowed with certain inalienable rights. While other countries might be tied together by bonds of history or blood or tribe or race or kinship, we are tied together by an idea, a principle brought forth for us 200 years ago. It is because of those men that we dare to call each other fellow citizens.

I mentioned Abraham Lincoln a while ago, and I think he understood this principle, this idea, best: The fathers of this country, he said, gave liberty not alone to the people living in this country, but to all the world, and for all future time. They gave us a promise that the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of men and that all should have an equal chance.

You are now full members of a nation that holds to no rank and knows no privileges. There is no one before whom you must take off your hat, no one behind whom you must walk, no one who has prior claims on your property or your dignity. We speak of all the great rights we enjoy as Americans -- of speech, of press, of religion, and so on. But we enjoy these rights because all of us are adopted children and we share in our inheritance as equals.

We are all, each and every one of us, proud of our national ancestors and attached to the land from which we came. But my grandparents came here, as you yourselves did, because America means to be, and is, a land of opportunity for yourselves and your children. It is truly a place where the burdens of other lands have been lifted and where all can have an equal chance. It will be a place where your children and your children's children will prosper. As the inheritance of America's 200 years is given to you, you now have it in your power to pass it on to others. In this small way, you are not only the adopted children of the Fathers of America, you are their equals, too.

One last note. From this day forward, no one will ask you to make an account of yourself. But if they do ask you what country you belong to, you're perfectly right to tell them that you have now come into your inheritance, because this is the land where your fathers died.

God bless America.