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**Remarks at the New-York Historical Society
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My fellow Americans, it is my great privilege to welcome you to citizenship in the democracy that is the USA. Today, you join more than twenty million current citizens, born in other lands, who chose, as you have, to make the United States of America their home. We are a nation made strong by people like you who traveled long distances, overcame great obstacles, and made tremendous sacrifices --- all to provide a better life for

themselves and their families. My own father arrived in this land at age 13, with no fortune and speaking no English. My mother was born four months after her parents, with several children in tow, came by ship to Ellis Island. My father and grandparents reached, as you do, for the American dream. As testament to our nation's promise, the daughter and granddaughter of these immigrants sits on the highest Court in the land and will proudly administer the oath of citizenship to you.

You have studied our system of government and know of its twin pillars. First, our government has limited powers; it can exercise only the authority expressly given to it by the Constitution. And second, citizens of this country enjoy certain fundamental rights. Those rights are our nation's hallmark and pride. They are set forth in the Bill of Rights, and other amendments to the Constitution. They are inalienable, yielding to no governmental decree. And our Constitution opens with the words: "We the people of the United States." By limiting government, specifying

rights, and empowering the people, the founders of the USA proclaimed that the heart of America would be its citizens, not its rulers.

After the words “We the people of the United States,” the Constitution sets out the aspiration “to form a more perfect Union.” At the start, it is true, the union very much needed perfection. The original Constitution permitted slavery and severely limited who counted among “We the people.” When the nation was new, only white, property-owning men had the right to vote, the most basic right of citizenship. But

over the course of our history, people left out at the start - - people held in human bondage, Native Americans, and women (50% of the population) came to be embraced as full citizens. A French observer of early America, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote that “[t]he greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than . . . other nation[s], but rather in her ability to repair her faults.” Through amendments to our Constitution, and court decisions applying those amendments, we abolished slavery, prohibited racial discrimination, and made men and women people of

**equal citizenship stature. In the vanguard of those
perfections were citizens just like you – new Americans
of every race and creed, making ever more vibrant our
national motto: e pluribus unum – out of many, one.**

**Though we have made huge progress, the work of
perfection is scarcely done. Many stains remain. In this
rich land, nearly a quarter of our children live in deep
poverty, nearly half of our citizens do not vote, and we
still struggle to achieve greater understanding and
appreciation of each other across racial, religious, and
socioeconomic lines. Yet we strive to realize the ideal —**

to become a more perfect union. As new, well informed citizens, you will play a vital part in that endeavor by voting in elections, serving on juries, and engaging in civic discourse.

We sing of America as “sweet land of liberty.”

Newcomers to our shores, people like you, came here from the earliest days of our nation to today, “[seeking] liberty — freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be [you and me].” I would like to convey to you, finally, how a great American jurist — Judge Learned Hand — understood liberty. He explained in

1944, what liberty meant to him when he greeted a large assemblage of new Americans gathered in Central Park to swear allegiance to the United States. These are

Judge Hand's words:

Just what is this sacred liberty that “must li[e] in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes.” “I cannot define [the spirit of liberty]; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other

men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias.”

May the spirit of liberty, as Judge Hand explained it, be your beacon. May you have the conscience and courage to act in accord with that high ideal as you play your part in helping to achieve a more perfect union.