



# A FINE TIME TO BECOME AN AMERICAN

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I picked a fine time to become an American.

It was a grey, overcast morning in Oakland, California. I was one of 1,094 people of every color and creed, from 85 nations, beginning with Afghanistan and ending with Yemen. We had gathered, anxiously clutching the requisite documents, outside the rather antique Paramount cinema.

I wasn't the only new citizen of European origin, but we were a distinct minority. Rather to my surprise, the Chinese were the most numerous group, accounting for close to a fifth of the new Americans. (How many Americans became Chinese citizens that week?) Next were the Mexicans (more than 150 of them), then the Filipinos, closely followed by the Indians.

Yet it was the sheer range of countries represented that was most marvelous. The young man to my right, immaculately dressed in white, was from Eritrea. He had studied computer science in Wales and had initially come to California to work for NASA.

I approach any encounter with US bureaucracy weighed down by dread. So I wondered, would this be like the Department of Motor Vehicles, famed for its Soviet-style antagonism to the public? Or would it be more like the implacable, pitiless Internal Revenue Service?

In fact, the officials of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services could hardly have been more affable. The master of ceremonies was a genial, balding, bespectacled chap who won his audience over with a virtuoso display of multilingualism, chatting to us in what sounded like pretty fluent Spanish, Chinese, French, Hindi and Tagalog.

Yet this was very far from a multicultural occasion. Quite the reverse. To get us in the mood for our impending Americanization, a choir sang a patriotic medley, including a rather baroque setting of the preamble to the constitution, *Yankee Doodle*, and Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land*.

Well, that did it! The way that song conjures up vast American landscapes ("From the redwood forest / To the Gulf Stream waters") always gets me by the throat because, glimpsed in films, such vistas were what first drew me to the United States.

Then came the information about our rights and obligations—specifically, our right to vote, our option to obtain a passport and our inextricable link to the Social Security system. (Nothing—rather disappointingly—about the right to bear arms. And not a word about the spiraling federal debt we were all now on the hook for.)

The ceremony then became more stirring. A “Faces of America” video had a distinctly martial soundtrack. We raised our right hands to swear the oath of allegiance, absolutely renouncing “all allegiance to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty” and swearing to “bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law.”

Then we placed our right hands on our hearts to recite the pledge of allegiance to the national flag “and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

It’s heady stuff, even in Oakland on a Thursday morning. And then, there he was—the President of the United States himself, much larger than life on the big screen. “This country is now your country,” Donald Trump told us rather sternly. “Our history is now your history. And our traditions are now your traditions.”

And that wasn’t all: “You now share the obligation to teach our values to others, to help newcomers assimilate to our way of life.” Compare and contrast with the Barack Obama version: “Together, we are a nation united not by any one culture, or ethnicity, or ideology . . .”

The grand finale was *God Bless the USA*, a country music anthem by Lee Greenwood, made famous following the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington. It too was a call-to-arms. “And I’m proud to be an American / Where at least I know I’m free / And I won’t forget the men who died / Who gave that right to me.”

More than half a century of being British has made it hard for me not to cringe just a little at this kind of thing. But this hokum is now my hokum. And this president is now my president, until such time as we, the people, vote in another one.

Yes, I picked a fine time to become an American—because it’s always a fine time.

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