

Becoming an American

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II.

IN THIS, my second letter, I shall write about the first of America's great fundamental documents, the Declaration of Independence. Every citizen and everyone planning to become a citizen should study this document and become familiar with the sentiments contained therein. He will find it more than a statement of the reasons why the colonists rebelled against a foreign rule. He will find there the greater fundamental principle of democratic government. However, it is so written that he should read it with an open mind. If he is anxious to find grievances against Government, he will find them there, for the paper is just what it purports to be, a statement of the reason why the colonists demanded their independence. If, however, he reads it, as I urge him to, as a fundamental document, he will find there the reasons why we have the kind of government we do have. He will find great emphasis placed on fairness in all our relations, on confidence in our fellow men, on such respect for them as they deserve, on the spirit of co-operation and on the need for an earnest devotion to one's country and all that it stands for. So I urge that you read carefully this great paper. You will find there no demand that you fail in your affection for your native land. No fair minded person expects you to lose this natural affection. In fact, those who look back to the land of their birth with great love are those, ordinarily, who become the best American citizens. You were born there, your parents lived there and may be buried there, and many of your childhood friends are still there. It is natural that as long as you live you will never forget the old home. It was there, too, that you first learned something of government, its character and its necessity. But now you are in America where you expect to spend the rest of your lives and to bring up your children as citizens. It may be that you will see some one of these citizens rise to high place in this government. Several men of high position in the Cabinet, in Congress, and in the Judiciary, are children of immigrants. Your children may be equally successful, for America is still a land of great opportunities for those who are ambitious and have a firm determination to make much of life. Hence, again I urge you to try to understand America fully. Learn how its government differs from the government of your native country. You may find methods and conditions you believe open to criticism. The fair minded person will not condemn honest criticism unless he feels that it is an attempt to tear down our institutions. Express your criticism to your teacher in night school or to someone else who understands our government, and ask for an explanation. You will probably find that you are wrong. Yet it is only by seeking information that you can come to an understanding of the nature of American rule.

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The Declaration of Independence was adopted July 4, 1776. The people whose delegates in the

Second Colonial Congress, wrote and adopted this great statement of human rights, were not from England alone. Scattered along the Atlantic coast there were at the time colonies of Dutch, of Swedes, of French, of Germans, of Scotch, and of Irish. All were lovers of liberty and all valued highly the few privileges of self-government which had been granted them. These men, in association with the English settlers, who were in the majority, were responsible for this daring act of declaring themselves independent of England. They had many reasons for this rebellion. The King of England, in the belief that the people of his country and of his colonies were merely his chattels, had attempted to deprive the colonists of most of their privileges of self-rule. Naturally this aroused great dissatisfaction and in the various colonies delegates were elected to a conference with the purpose that this conference should remonstrate against this arbitrary policy. Few thought of independence, yet when the delegates came together and discussed the matter, a majority came to the belief that there was no other alternative. Hence a Declaration of Independence was written and adopted. Even then, few people expected from the movement anything more than the frightening of the English government into taking a more lenient policy. It is not my thought, however, to trace out the history of this movement, but rather to speak of the governmental purposes contained in the document.

The first statement is one about the need for frankness and honesty in all our relations. In America, we should be very careful to elect to office only good men, and then we should place confidence in them. If we disapprove of their policies, the only fair way is to tell them so. In no other way can we bring about better government. This opening statement, that "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that we should declare the causes," is fundamental in America. Often newspaper criticisms of public officials are unjust, and yet out of this condemnation, unfair as it may be, great good may come. Officers are so led to study harder how to carry their responsibilities properly. One of our greatest dangers is under-handed criticism of the officer. This merely weakens him in his office without giving him the chance to correct his mistakes. Furthermore, it adds expense to the taxpayer and brings some part of the government often into an undeserved disrespect. So it is also in our relations with foreign countries; an open, frank statement of our position is the only fair policy. This was announced to the world in the Declaration as the colonists' idea of one of the greatest fundamentals of good government and has always remained a cornerstone of our government.

In the second place, the government is based on the statement that all men are created equal. This does not mean that all men are born equal in physical and mental powers. Some babies are strong and others are weak, and they will become strong or weak men. It means on the contrary, that all men are born