

I AM AN AMERICAN

address by

HONORABLE FRANCIS BIDDLE
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

at



Middletown, Ohio

Sunday, May 21, 1944

Four o'clock E.W.T.

Broadcast over WLW, Cincinnati

We meet here today in Middletown, Ohio, to celebrate I AM AN AMERICAN DAY for the fifth time. The ceremonies this year, held in cooperation with the American Legion, are to welcome the new American citizens into our national community.

It is particularly significant to me that this ceremony is being held in a typical American town, a town whose history began in the early years of our expansion westward, and whose population of native stock has never known the impact of foreign immigration. In such a community the new American citizen will find his own place and have the opportunity of sharing in the best of our traditions and institutions.

Ever since 1802, when Middletown was a busy canal port with the shipment of hogs to the large pork markets of Cincinnati, until today, when this great fertile Miami Valley produces tobacco, wheat, corn, hay and oats, and sustains substantial manufacturing establishments, it has followed a course of growth typical of American history and development. Its healthy balance between agriculture and manufacturing makes for a fruitful and vigorous life.

The city has always been progressive and its people vitally interested in civic affairs. It operates under the Commission Manager form of Government, and few newcomers escape the vigorous influence of the Middletown Civic Association. It was natural, therefore, that the celebration of I AM AN AMERICAN DAY here, in which every civic, patriotic, fraternal and industrial organization participates, and the entire population turns out to see the great parade, received attention last year throughout the country. The success of these celebrations is largely owing to the leadership of such men as Judge Fred B. Cramer of the Court of Common Pleas of Butler County,

Ohio; of the late George M. Verity, founder of the American Rolling Mill Company; of Frank DoBrozso, President of the American Citizens Club.

"I Am An American Day" belongs to those who have become citizens during the year -- by coming of age or by naturalization. To the latter its significance is particularly deep. They are being admitted to membership in our democratic society. They have lived in that society, have learned our language and something about American institutions. They have wondered at the great Declaration which set down in universal language the quiet certainty of the men of the small new country that all men everywhere were created equal. They were perhaps not altogether certain what that meant, looking about at the inequalities which made life not dissimilar, except perhaps in degree, from the life they remembered in the countries they had left. But they knew there was a difference; and that if they had not found all that their hopes had created and their returning compatriots had told them, something that was new and precious and human stirred in the very air, and in the voices of the people, the careless way they spoke, and the proud way they carried themselves. Especially those who had left Germany during the past few years knew the difference.

And if the Constitution had not become familiar, it had ceased to be a brooding mystery, too complicated for simple folk to understand, people who had to work hard all day so that by the time night school came, it seemed almost impossible. At first at least; but many friends had helped them, not only the teachers, but their own children, who were usually citizens and didn't have to be naturalized; and neighbors, who were sometimes a little confusing when they tried to explain; and the Government officials, who were usually patient; and the visitors from the immigrant societies, who certainly

helped them understand. Gradually it all began to make sense. The Constitution said how you had to elect the President and Congress and these two mustn't interfere with each other, or if they did the third power, the courts, came along and umpired it out between them, and kept giving a sort of balance. And that was democracy. No part of the Government must get too powerful, and put it over on any other part.

And then, as a kind of afterthought, had come the first Ten Amendments, which protected the people and said that the Government mustn't push them about. For it was their Government. They had chosen the kind of government they wanted, and had put it in the Constitution to last forever. The people who had fought the Revolution didn't like kings, they didn't like Government-established churches, they didn't like to be railroaded without a regular trial. So when they looked over the Constitution they weren't certain that this new government they had just created might not turn out to be like the old governments that had pushed about the plain people, or people who opposed the Government. And the fathers who had fought the Revolution and written the Constitution took a long breath and wrote into the Bill of Rights the great freedoms--freedom of the press, freedom to worship, the right to assemble peaceably, trial by jury, protection against unlawful search and seizure.

It had been hard work learning all this, absorbing it, and all the time trying to talk like an American and look like an American.

And then the great day had come, the day when they went to court with their sponsors, who said they were of good character, and

they took the oath of loyalty to the United States of America, and the Judge welcomed them into the great family of Americans, and told them to live worthily as Americans. And then he sometimes shook hands with them, if there were not too many, and they sang "America", and joined in the salute to the flag, all saying it together.

The third Sunday of May is "I Am An American Day." Since 1940 it has been set aside by the Congress and by the President's proclamation to commemorate annually the importance of American citizenship. This year, our celebration of "I Am An American Day" carries a special significance, because the year just passed saw more foreigners become citizens than any year since naturalization began. There were just short of 400,000 of them. If naturalization should keep up at that rate all the aliens in the United States would be naturalized in less than ten years, and today this group is less than three per cent of the total population. And yet it is far more important than this percentage indicates. There are, for example, some 600,000 Italians now in the United States; but the men and women of Italian blood and therefore Italian sympathies and traditions run into several millions. And so with the Irish and the Poles and Scandinavians and the other nationalities that make up all the divergent strains of our population.

The unusually large number of new citizens admitted in 1943, far more than ever before, is explained by a number of contributing factors. For the past five years the natural desire of human beings to demonstrate their loyalties in time of crisis, particularly in this war when the ideology of fascism clashes with the ideology of

democracy, has resulted in enormously increased applications for citizenship. In this period nearly 1,400,000 new citizens have taken their oaths of allegiance, an average of more than 270,000 a year since the European war began. Other reasons also contribute. Earl Harrison, Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization, has reorganized the district offices of the Service, and for the first time in many years they are current in their naturalization work. And finally, the Federal Judges have cooperated with the Service to the fullest extent, by holding extra sessions of court specially for this work, and in many other ways. Impetus was also given this trend by the Registration Act of 1940, which brought home to those who were not citizens the realization that they were not part of the American family even though most of them had lived in this country for many years.

Added encouragement was given to naturalization by the Second War Powers Act, which greatly liberalized and simplified the process for members of the armed forces. It eliminated for men in the Army and Navy the requirements of filing a declaration of intention ("first papers"), of a stated period of residence in the United States, of fees, of educational tests, and, in many instances, of formal appearance in court. And for the first time in American history it provided for the naturalization of American citizens outside the boundaries of the United States.

As a result of these changes, approximately 55,000 of those naturalized in 1943 were members of the armed forces, of whom some 5,200 were naturalized abroad -- In Iceland, England, North Africa, Sicily and the Caribbean - by consular officers or officers of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This program is now being extended to the Pacific and the Far East.

But not everyone who applies for citizenship obtains it. During a war such applications, particularly of those who are natives of countries against which we are fighting, undergo an unusually rigorous investigation by the authorities. It is not surprising, therefore, that a larger percentage of applicants was rejected last year than in any previous year -- more than four per cent of the total.

Even before we entered the war we recognized that the status of citizenship could be used to cloak disloyal acts. We had seen the infiltration by German agents and spies of the countries which the Nazi Reich had determined to crush and conquer. We had seen the moral defenses of these countries confused and softened before physical invasion began. We had seen some countries of the two American continents overrun by an advance guard of propagandists and spies disguised as business men or scientists.

In our country there were gatherings of the German-American Bund, where the "new order" was hailed by young men who gave the Nazi salute and discussed the plans and orders and resolutions that emanated from the All-Highest. Fascist organizations, usually with high-sounding patriotic names, sprang up overnight, catered to current hatred and harped on ancient wrongs and prejudices of race and religion. There was marching and counter-marching,

drilling and preparations against "The Day", and always the propaganda of hate and disloyalty. The hatred of free democratic ways and open justice, the impulse to cruelty and to mob violence, that had found expression years before in the Ku Klux Klan, in the Know-Nothings, in the A.P.A., seethed again and came openly to life in little groups that met to preach hatred and violence as a way of life, even as they invoked the protection of the American Constitution, to the uninformed and the confused in the bitter pools on the edges of American democracy. Led by German agents, supported by American men and women who fundamentally hated the Democratic concept, they tried again here those methods which in other countries had made easier the final onslaught of the iron forces of the new Nazi order. For if America could only be kept out of the war, how certain did the victory in Europe become! And after a "liberated" Europe, a world of German supermen and acquiescent slaves, there would be time and opportunity to deal with the Western Hemisphere...

And before Pearl Harbor there was uncertainty throughout the country, and many honest isolationists listened to the talk that this was an imperial war, that we must not be dragged in, while below the surface stirred the old hatreds, anti-semitism, and the ancient distrust of England, so much of which had come down through the history books.

Even before Pearl Harbor a Federal Grand Jury had been called in the District of Columbia to investigate sedition. Subsequently, throughout the country, there were a number of Federal indictments and convictions. These were climaxed by the recent indictment in the District of Columbia charging thirty persons, most of them American citizens, with conspiring with members of the Nazi party in this country and in Germany to establish the National

Socialist form of government in the United States. The trial of this case has already begun.

These sedition cases are part of a general war program of the Department of Justice, which includes cases brought against foreign agents failing to register their propaganda activities under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, such as George Sylvester Viereck; against the spies caught by the slow, patient, scientific work of the FBI; against saboteurs. It includes the internment of alien enemies immediately after war was declared, denaturalization of newly naturalized American citizens who had taken their oath of citizenship with reservations, and without an honest loyalty to their newly adopted country. All these are correlated activities for the internal security of the country during the war, for which the Department of Justice is made responsible under the law.

The act of choosing a new country is voluntary for those who would be Americans. It is not forced on newcomers to our shores. They can if they prefer live and die aliens on our soil. No pressure is brought on them to change their allegiance. And, being voluntary, it involves the exercise of free choice, and the clear realization of what the choice entails. It should not be lightly made, nor the new citizenship carelessly bestowed. For to a sincere man or woman it is no casual or trivial thing to abandon the ties that have bound him to his fatherland. It is not unlike a change of religion, and very clearly the new citizen must see what lies ahead. It is not enough that considerations of convenience or perhaps commercial prudence or a sense of greater security suggest the decision. It must be an act of faith, touching not only the mind with the logic of democracy, but even more deeply the heart with that ultimate and incorruptible certainty that is the American

religion - a belief in the integrity of the individual man and woman. This is a deep conviction rooted in the spirit, not easily put into words, but no less passionate because it may be largely inarticulate. Today when the choice of living as members of a democratic society, of preserving that society, or of opposing its growth and its freedom, divides the world, loyalty to a country becomes also loyalty to an idea.

Nor can that loyalty be defined in a handful of phrases any more than the faith which inspires it. But we may be certain of one thing, that the new allegiance must be complete. There can be no unity in our country if the political clashes of foreign nations are carried into the new citizenship. Our cultural richness comes from many strains and from varied races. Our American democracy is strong enough to welcome and to cherish many ways of thinking and of acting. The melting pot should never mean that men must be forced to think alike, or to forget the ancient cultures on which our growth and variety has thrived. To the Anglo-Saxon strain has been added the Scandinavian, the German, the Irish, the Slavic.

But when these men of different nations stand up and claim by free choice to be a part of us they must forever foreswear and forsake the old loyalties. Now they are Americans, no longer Poles or Greeks, Russians or Frenchmen. Now they are Americans. Now and hereafter, whether we are at war or at peace, on the battlefields around Monte Cassino or in the factories of Detroit or Chicago, in the war and around the peace tables, everywhere and at all times we are Americans, now and forever, whether once we were sons of another nation; even if our fathers and their fathers had fought for what they cherished in Ireland or in Russia or in Spain.

Once citizenship is accepted there must be no more divided loyalty. When men fight disloyalty becomes treason. And as victory is nearer and the

whole complicated picture of post-war Europe approaches, and the tangled social and political map begins to unfold, Americans must never for a moment forget that they are no longer Europeans, and that they cannot own allegiance to more than one country. Theodore Roosevelt, thirty years ago, at the beginning of the first World War said: "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism . . . The one absolutely certain way of bringing this Nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a Nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities. . . "

Today President Roosevelt's warning has special application. Indeed, the responsible leaders of European nations which have given large groups of citizens to the United States realize the importance of this principle that an American citizen's sole loyalty is to the United States. For example, recently Polish Prime Minister Stanislaw Mikolajczyk stated that he could see nothing but harm resulting from a confusion of the Old World's problems with those of the new and that he would not tolerate any interference in American politics by agents of his Government. The responsibility, however, is not upon foreign groups alone to refrain from enlisting the aid of our citizens. A major duty also falls on free American citizens themselves when appeals are made to them to use their American citizenship to influence the solution of some foreign dispute. They should ask themselves whether those who appeal to them are advancing foreign interests or the interests of the United States. An American citizen should never be enlisted in a foreign cause which runs contrary to the interests of this, his own, country.

Today we welcome our new citizens. And today, here in Middletown, Ohio, the American Legion Post of this City together with other veterans'

and servicemen's organizations, are holding with us brief memorial services for the men of Butler county who have given their lives in the present war. They are no more; and it is appropriate that we should cherish their memory as a part of the ceremony in greeting the newcomers so that they too may hold that memory dear. And today, throughout the nation, all of us remember, as it were together, humbly, but with a steady and ardent pride, what it is to be an American.