

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The land of the free and home of the brave has become increasingly xenophobic in recent years. After 9/11 ordinary Americans grew more suspicious of outsiders, and law enforcement agencies began to encroach on cherished civil liberties in the name of national security. As someone who has always subscribed to the traditional American belief that immigration is what made this country great, I felt obligated to do my part to counteract the growing anti-immigrant sentiment. ROSEVELT'S AMERICA is my response to those who are inclined to close the door on the "tired, poor, huddled masses" of the world "yearning to breathe free."

After being tortured and narrowly escaping execution in Liberia, Rosevelt Henderson makes his way to America to start his life over again in a strange country. He brings his three children with him but is forced to leave his pregnant wife behind. Although Rosevelt was trained as a civil engineer, he doesn't hesitate to work day and night as a janitor, assembly-line worker, and driver to support his family. Eventually his perseverance pays off, and he is reunited with his wife who quickly gets a job as a nurse's aid. After years of struggle and deprivation, Rosevelt and his family are finally able to enjoy the prosperity and freedom that drew them to this country.

It would take a hard-hearted person not to be stirred by Rosevelt's harrowing journey from Liberia to America. This uplifting narrative plays right into the long-standing American doctrine that anyone willing to sacrifice and work hard can ultimately become successful. While the ladder out of poverty is arguably getting much steeper for those starting on the bottom rung, the fact that it can still be done remains as inspirational today as it was centuries ago.

ROSEVELT'S AMERICA is unintentionally the most patriotic film I've ever made. Over the past two decades my documentaries have usually taken aim at the entrenched barriers that prevent people from lifting their families out of poverty, but ROSEVELT'S AMERICA poignantly illustrates that it is difficult but not impossible to overcome those barriers.

My fondest hope is that ROSEVELT'S AMERICA can make a small contribution to efforts to encourage more openness for new citizens, especially refugees fleeing persecution in war torn countries around the globe. Unfortunately, too many people resent new immigrants and assume that they constitute an unaffordable drain on our national treasury. But, immigrants add about 10 billion dollars each year to the US economy and pay \$80,000 more in taxes than they receive in government benefits over their lifetimes. As a filmmaker, I've learned that powerful statistics are often less persuasive than a good story. By putting a dignified human face on one immigrant's quest for a better life in America, I believe I'm making my strongest possible case against a growing desire to close our borders.

Roger Weisberg, November 15, 2004