

The Government Stole My Home

No U.S. Supreme Court decision in the modern era has been so quickly and widely reviled as the infamous *Kelo v. City of New London* decision, in which the Court ruled that Susette Kelo's small home in New London, Connecticut, and the homes of her neighbors could be taken by the government and given over to a private developer based on the mere prospect that the new use for the property might generate more taxes or jobs. Three years after the decision, on the eve of the release of a new book about her story, *Little Pink House: A True Story of Defiance and Courage*, Susette Kelo came to Cato to give a first-person account of the struggle to save her home.

When this eminent domain situation first began about 10 years ago, I had no experience in public speaking. When I was first asked to speak, I said, "Oh no, I can't possibly do that."

Friends and supporters said I could. All I had to do was stand up, speak from the heart and tell the truth. So here goes:

My name is Susette Kelo and the government stole my home.

First, the municipal government of my hometown, New London, Connecticut, stole it. The state of Connecticut said it was legal for them to take it. Finally, the federal government said it was constitutional to steal not only my home but the homes of all my neighbors and, in fact, anyone's home for the purpose of economic development.

And even though over 40 states have passed legislation offering some protection to home and business owners, don't think your property is safe, because it is not.

Over 10 years ago, I was lucky enough to find a great deal on a house with a terrific view of the Thames River, the Long Island Sound, and the Atlantic Ocean, in New London, Connecticut. I spent every spare moment fixing it up and making it the kind of home I had always dreamed of. I'm sure you've heard the expression "location, location, location." Well, this was the wrong location, even if I didn't know it yet.

One morning in 1998, I picked up the

paper to discover that Pfizer pharmaceutical company was coming to town. And one of the things that Pfizer did not want, according to the Pfizer executive who just



happened to be the husband of the president of the New London Development Corporation, Claire Gaudiani, was to see tenement buildings through their glass windows. Maybe we did not live in the grand manors that the Pfizer executives lived in, but our homes were well cared for, we paid our taxes, and we lived in

a neighborhood that was comfortable for us. But we weren't going to be comfortable for long.

For 10 long years, we fought to keep our homes. We fought in the media. We fought in the city council and in the legislative offices. We fought in the courts. We won the support of the public, but the politicians made our lives hell.

Eviction notices were posted on our doors Thanksgiving eve. Our neighbors' homes were demolished around us. Our streets were shut down. Some of us became ill. Some of us even died.

Even the air was difficult to breathe from the demolitions and the blasting around us. But we never gave up because we believed this land was our land. That is, until the U.S. Supreme Court told us—and the world—differently.

What the Supreme Court basically said was our land was only our land until someone else could make better use of it and pay more taxes. Even though we, the plaintiffs in the *Kelo v. New London* case, lost our personal battle, the war is still being fought. As a result of the Supreme Court's unbelievable ruling, a majority of the states have passed legislation offering more protection to American property owners. Probably everyone who has ever given a speech hopes that something he or she said will be worth remembering, and in my case, I hope you remember this:

If it's true that it takes an entire village to raise a child, then we, and our children, are in serious trouble. Although 42 states have passed laws providing more protection against the abuse of eminent domain, there are still many places where neighborhoods are destroyed to make way for malls, hotels, and spas.

Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indian tribe once said: "The White Man made us many promises, but he kept only one. He said he'd take our land and he did." This practice still continues. Let this generation be the one to bring this terrible abuse to an end.