



Discharging immigrants breaks the universal code of honor

BY JEFFREY E. PHILLIPS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 07/11/18 02:00 PM EDT
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“The common bond that unites every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine is a commitment to duty, honor and country. Whether native born, naturalized, or not U.S. citizens at all, service members are unified not by a common heritage, race, religion or creed, but rather by this universal code that builds character, breeds conviction and encourages valor,” Emilio T. Gonzalez, then the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, an immigrant and former U.S. Army soldier, [testified before the Senate Committee on Armed Services](#) in July 2006.

The ongoing [discharge of immigrant recruits](#) robs a U.S. military that is struggling to meet enlistment goals and profoundly betrays the very national values these young people seek to defend.

The U.S. military’s immigration policy dates to the Civil War, when 20 percent of the 1.5 million soldiers in the Union Army were [foreign-born](#). Many had lived in the United States for years; some presumably sought citizenship by fighting for their adopted nation. The war record of these troops of Irish, German, Scotch and other heritages is legendary.

The opportunity for immigrants to serve in the military and achieve naturalization continues today. In the past 17 years, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has naturalized 125,452 members of the military.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush issued an [executive order](#) that expedited naturalization of aliens and noncitizen nationals on active military duty. With the tempo of war (a war that has yet to be formally declared) straining the military, in 2009 the [Military Accessions Vital to](#)

the National Interest (MAVNI) program was established as a special U.S. military recruiting program for certain immigrants.

Reversing these sensible policies, the current precipitous discharge of immigrants from the Army could not come at a worse time. The Army recently announced the likelihood that it will not reach its fiscal year 2018 recruiting goal and has set a lower goal (which by no means is assured) — this, despite offering hundreds of millions of dollars in bonuses.

Somewhere near the core of the problem is the scarcity of quality recruits for our military: 71 percent of Americans 17-24 years of age are ineligible to join, primarily because they are too overweight, poorly educated, and/or they have a record of serious crime or drug abuse. Eligibility is one factor; another is propensity to serve, which is about 15 percent of those eligible. The value of quality immigrant recruits becomes obvious.

The Army is compensating by recruiting people who test below the preferred standard and by waiving certain felonies or medical conditions. These recruits are more likely to perform poorly, cause trouble, and risk those with whom they fight.

The discharge of willing immigrants exacerbates a growing crisis: America's military is having difficulty filling its ranks. Now, badly needed recruits are being purged from critical specialties or where bilingual capabilities are needed; many of them are from the Reserve Components — the Reserve and National Guard — without which our military cannot effectively fight.

Recruiting immigrants quickly and efficiently is an essential capability for a country relying on an all-volunteer force under this type of pressure — and the pressure is increasing, with undiminished operational tempos.

"The [Department of Defense] needs every qualified patriot who wants to serve, and given that less than 1 percent of the U.S. population makes the decision to serve, we appreciate every recruit's willingness to serve — especially someone who isn't even a U.S. resident," wrote a Pentagon spokesman. He added, "We must address counterintelligence risks that are identified by the department's intelligence and [inspector general] communities."

That's prudent: terrorism and a war now into its second decade justify a stout security clearance policy. Even if a young immigrant wants to fight for us, we should ensure that person is not a security risk. The odds are good; the Department of Defense (DoD) states that "Two of three applicants, on average, make it through the security screening process and go on to serve."

Bureaucrats cite a fearsome backlog of security clearance investigations to justify breaking the contract with these young people and weakening military readiness. While awaiting clearances, the immigrant status of many recruits expired, rendering them ineligible. The job of doing security clearances, once the province of the White House Office of Personnel Management, is moving to DoD. This transfer should help the Pentagon complete investigations more quickly; no agency on earth is better equipped and more skilled at getting things done than the U.S. military.

Backlog or no, America made a commitment to these young men and women who committed in return to serve this nation — many, if not most, desiring citizenship. These are the dedicated people our nation badly needs. They met requirements for naturalization from military service and many have thus far served well. We are shamefully breaking faith with them, their families and with our own values.

Bureaucratic and legalistic expediency do not justify this breach of good faith.

The Reserve Officers Association calls on President Trump to direct the Department of Human Services to work with MAVNI recruits on their immigration status and halt the discharges or release of candidates until DoD can process investigations at a level adequate to the need (and no more), whether that is days, weeks or months. Good faith matters, as does the accomplishment of recruiting goals.

The code of which former soldier Gonzalez spoke before the Senate 12 years ago “has a way of superseding nationalities. The placement of foreign-born and native soldiers together within a platoon, on a ship at sea, attached to an air squadron or a fire team, ensures that the only true measures of a fighting man or woman is their steadfast dedication to the mission and reverence for the chain of command. Under fire, all other considerations are irrelevant.”

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