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STRENGTHEN CITIZENSHIP IN INS REFORM

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For good reason, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will not likely survive much longer in its current form. Not only is its bureaucracy not meeting the requirements of increased border security demanded in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, but the visa notification for two of the terrorists, which arrived a full six months after the attacks, is undeniable evidence of the agency's habitual inefficiency.

Several proposals to restructure the Immigration and Naturalization Service have been put forth. The Justice Department announced a plan to separate INS's service and enforcement functions to improve efficiency and effectiveness. A proposed bill, H.R. 3231, would dismantle the INS and split its functions into two separate bureaus, one for immigration enforcement and one for citizenship and immigration services. The Administration is discussing plans to combine the INS, Customs Bureau, and Border Patrol within the Justice Department.

In their efforts to make long-overdue changes in the INS and address the nation's legitimate security needs, policymakers must be careful not to weaken but rather to substantially strengthen the INS's long-term core mission of citizenship formation.

The INS, or whatever successor agency is tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the immigration process, must first and foremost control America's borders and prevent terrorists from exploiting—and illegal immigrants from circumventing—the immigration system. The agency must be made more efficient and be better managed. But now, more than ever, this strategy must be balanced

with a renewed and self-confident emphasis on creating a strong naturalization process for law-abiding immigrants who yearn to be Americans. INS reform provides an important opportunity for the nation's leaders to underscore the responsibilities of citizenship, which would encourage native-born Americans to become better citizens as well.

The Importance of Naturalization. America's Founders favored immigration as long as the foreign-born learned the common language and embraced America's cultural and political institutions. They insisted on a strong assimilation process: Immigrants could come to America if they became *Americans* and learned the common principles rooted in its history and political traditions. Americanization of immigrants is what makes a multicultural *pluribus* into an *unum*.

Naturalization is the critical process by which a foreign citizen or national, by fulfilling the requirements established in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), becomes a legal United States citizen. This act grants the Attorney General the sole authority to naturalize immigrants and the responsibility (carried out through

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the INS) to make sure that they demonstrate both an understanding of the English language and “a knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and the principles and form of government, of the United States.” The Attorney General is also responsible for making sure that every applicant for naturalization is “a person of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States.” These pivotal duties must be carried out.

A Citizenship Agenda. Several things could be done to revive and strengthen the naturalization process by which American principles are inculcated in those who seek to become U.S. citizens:

- **Change the language of reform to emphasize citizenship rather than “service.”** Using the right language goes far in sending the right message and determining the right policy. Making the INS into a better, more efficient “service” agency like the local Department of Motor Vehicles does not address its citizenship mission. One way to emphasize this core mission would be to create a separate Office of American Citizenship, or the appropriate organizational unit, that is tasked with strengthening the citizenship and civic education aspects of the immigration process.
- **Actively promote citizenship.** The INS is supposed to “broadly distribute information concerning the benefits” and “seek the assistance of appropriate community groups, private volunteer agencies, and other relevant organizations” in promoting the opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship. The current emphasis on voting and obtaining a U.S. passport should be expanded to include broader benefits—such as enjoying the rule of law, limited government, and the protection of constitutional rights—and to bring in nongovernmental groups to help promote and make the case for citizenship.
- **Test knowledge rather than trivia.** The current tests given to candidates for citizenship to determine their “understanding of and attachment to the fundamental principles” of the U.S. Constitution are ridiculously easy, based on short answers to simple questions (“Who was the first president?”) that encourage rote memorization. The exam should be strengthened to test core knowledge (“What is the difference between a republic and a democracy?”). It should also be made uniform, since it varies in each district and is rather subjective depending on the examiner. And while the INS is authorized to promote instruction and training in citizenship responsibilities, which include “preparing and distributing citizenship textbooks,” what little is done could be greatly improved.
- **Emphasize the citizenship oath.** Applicants must make a public oath of citizenship, the contents of which are described, not specified, in the INA. The oath—and especially its renunciation of foreign allegiances—should be promulgated; its words could be modified to simplify its language and underscore its importance. The INS (or the new office) also should strengthen the rules and procedures to ensure that citizenship ceremonies “are in keeping with the dignity of the occasion.”
- **Enforce the language requirement.** The requirement that applicants understand the English language must be enforced. Candidates must be able to comprehend both the exam questions and the words of the oath of citizenship. Haphazard application of this requirement undermines the naturalization process and immigrant assimilation into American society.

Conclusion. Over the past several years, the INS lost sight of its citizenship mission and, as a result, weakened one of the strongest moral and political arguments for an immigration policy that favors U.S. citizenship. Without this focus, U.S. immigration policy is either too narrow (focusing exclusively on enforcement and security) or too negative (focusing on what is wrong, not what is right, with immigration). A successful naturalization policy turns immigration into a virtue rather than a vice because it makes immigrants not only citizens of the United States, but also Americans, prepared to enjoy and defend the blessings—and responsibilities—of liberty.

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