

Republicans Seek Probe Of Immigration Program; Accelerated Naturalization Process Criticized

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Body

Congressional **Republicans** yesterday called for the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate what they called "criminal fraud and abuse" in a Clinton administration **program** to **accelerate** the **naturalization** of immigrants as American citizens.

A letter to Attorney General Janet Reno from five GOP members of Congress asserted that the Citizenship USA **program**, which **naturalized** a record 1 million citizens in the past year, has been "corrupted by a reckless drive for political gain" in next week's elections. It charged that the **process** has been plagued by fraud and that large numbers of "violent criminals" have been sworn in as citizens by an administration hopeful to increase the ranks of people they thought would vote Democratic.

The accusations are based on an investigation by members of a subcommittee of the House Government Oversight and Reform Committee, which has amassed tens of thousands of documents, including 50,000 FBI criminal history records on newly **naturalized** citizens. In a review of 20,300 of these "rap sheets" so far, **Republican** staffers claim that at least 5 percent -- more than 1,000 -- show convictions for "crimes which should have automatically disqualified [the applicants] from citizenship."

An examination of dozens of the rap sheets, which also were released to the media, raises questions about why some applicants were granted citizenship. But a number of others billed as "egregious" examples by the **Republican** staffers appear not to contain grounds for automatic rejection. Many of the rap sheets are for crimes committed before a series of laws since 1990 expanded the offenses that are grounds for denial, and others contain no indication of how a case was resolved.

In an intensely partisan dispute, the subcommittee's **Republicans**, led by Rep. Bill Zeff (N.H.), are accusing the White House of having minted hordes of potential new Democratic voters without putting them through the proper testing or background checks. The administration counters that the investigation risks violating the privacy of tens of thousands of new citizens.

When the dispute erupted last month, **Republican** politicians were accusing the administration of having **naturalized** as many as 100,000 "criminals" since August 1995. That figure has since evaporated. But the FBI subsequently delivered 50,000 rap sheets to the committee, cautioning that they did not necessarily mean the person was a criminal, much less convicted of a crime that would preclude **naturalization**.

In letters to the governors of six states, Zeff and oversight committee chairman William F. Clinger, Jr. (Pa.) this week said the FBI records confirmed their worst fears. They sent each governor rap sheets that they said "reflect the most egregious examples we have found to date."

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Of five rap sheets sent to Texas Gov. George W. Bush (R), however, four involved misdemeanors and one was for a felony sexual assault committed 10 years ago, a Bush spokeswoman said. None of these crimes, however, is considered grounds for denying the applicants citizenship.

Among other cases cited as egregious by subcommittee staffers were those of a man from Trinidad and Tobago who was convicted of manslaughter in 1980, a Cuban man who served four years in jail for a 1974 homicide and a Turk convicted of dealing drugs in 1987. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials say the offenses were not grounds for automatic denial.

More recent examples cited by Republican staffers as pointing to improper naturalizations include a 1991 case of welfare fraud, a 1992 sexual assault in Florida and a 1992 aggravated assault in New Jersey.

In Pennsylvania, the FBI this week arrested a restaurant owner from Ecuador who obtained citizenship last month under an alias despite being wanted on a murder charge for a killing in Chicago in the 1980s. Also among those recently naturalized under puzzling circumstances was a German woman who was released from prison in New York in December 1995 after serving a sentence for a 1982 charge of attempted murder.

INS officials caution that only by checking the person's entire file, of which the rap sheet is but a part, can a conclusion be reached on whether approval of a naturalization application was justified.

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