

GOP Intensifies Action On Citizenship Inquiry

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Body

Has the Clinton administration given U.S. **citizenship** to as many as 100,000 immigrant criminals in the past year to get their votes in next month's elections?

As they enter their final two weeks of frenzied campaigning, Republican leaders are raising this charge as part of a broadside against the administration's **Citizenship** USA program, a drive begun last year to naturalize record numbers of immigrants applying to become American citizens.

Administration officials say the charge is a gross distortion of a process that involves checking the fingerprints of **citizenship** applicants against an FBI database. Officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the FBI say these fingerprint checks often produce positive matches for reasons unrelated to criminality, much less to felony convictions that would disqualify applicants for **citizenship**.

The sudden emergence of **citizenship**-for-criminals as a campaign issue stems from an investigation by the national security subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, which has demanded tens of thousands of records from the INS and the FBI.

In its latest **action**, the subcommittee yesterday sent subpoenas to FBI Director Louis J. Freeh and INS Commissioner Doris M. Meissner for the raw "rap sheets" of immigrants who have been naturalized since last year. The agencies say they will provide the relevant information that the subcommittee wants, but not raw individual data on new U.S. citizens.

The INS also responded to the furor yesterday by issuing new regulations, effective immediately, that allow it to revoke the **citizenship** of people found to have been improperly naturalized. Up to now, such revocation could be accomplished only through prosecution by a U.S. attorney.

Among the documents amassed is an Oct. 21 letter from Charles W. Archer, assistant director of the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division. "Historically, 8 to 10 percent of the INS submissions are identified with an existing criminal record in our files," the letter says. It says the FBI's search of the records of more than 1 million immigrants thus "could identify approximately 100,000 criminal history records" in response to the subcommittee's request for the rap sheets of everyone naturalized between Aug. 31, 1995 and Sept. 30, 1996.

California's Republican governor, Pete Wilson, seized on the letter to charge that "dangerous sex offenders" and other "felons" have been naturalized in what amounts to a program of "drive-through **citizenship** for dangerous criminals" as part of the administration's push to get "more than 1 million new citizens on the voter roles before November 5th."

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) said the list of new citizens includes "drug dealers, rapists, murderers, armed robbers."

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In an angry letter to Meissner on Oct. 16, Rep. Bill Zeff (R-N.H.), chairman of the national security subcommittee that is investigating **Citizenship** USA, charged that "the country has suffered the introduction of up to 100,000 potentially dangerous criminals" and that the INS is engaged in "a deliberate cover-up."

In a letter to Zeff on Wednesday, however, the FBI's Archer said that a computer search of 924,083 new citizens' files so far had produced "38,246 matches against our records." He cautioned that "a 'match' only means we have a record on file. It does not imply that the person to whom the record pertains has a criminal conviction." The letter added, "Moreover, the record may contain noncriminal, administrative **actions**, which do not contain a final disposition."

In other words, INS officials say, the newly naturalized citizens with "criminal records" may include people who entered the country as illegal aliens and later obtained legal status, those who were placed in deportation proceedings before being granted asylum and people who were charged with a misdemeanor. Among them may also be persons arrested on felony charges, but never convicted.

The challenge for the Zeff subcommittee is to find evidence of people who slipped through the naturalization system despite having criminal records -- that is, felony convictions -- that should have disqualified them, or who lied about their pasts. At this point, no one knows how many such immigrants were improperly naturalized, and Zeff aides now say it may be nowhere near 100,000.

The congressman's staff argues, however, that the matches in FBI files all relate to "criminal histories," rather than administrative **actions**, and that more than 60,000 "duplicate" records mentioned in Archer's latest letter may reflect a deliberate INS attempt at concealment.

The INS says that of the 1.3 million immigrants who applied for U.S. **citizenship** in fiscal 1996, about 17 percent were rejected on various grounds, including criminal records. The agency says many of the people in Archer's initial estimate of 100,000 may be among the 221,000 who were denied **citizenship** by INS examiners.

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