

**SPOTLIGHT ON THE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS:
IMMIGRANTS IN THE MILITARY**



FACTS & FIGURES

- Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) are eligible to enlist in the military.¹
- Male LPRs ages 18-25 are required to register with the Selective Service. However, citizenship is required for virtually all appointments as a commissioned, warrant, or National Guard officer.
- Nationally, each year around 8,000 noncitizens enlist in the military.
- According to February 2008 data from the Department of Defense, **more than 65,000 immigrants (noncitizens and naturalized citizens) were serving on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces.** This represents approximately 5% of all active-duty personnel.
- The top two countries of origin for foreign-born military personnel in the U.S. are the Philippines and Mexico. Nearly 11 percent of those serving in the armed forces are of Hispanic origin.
- The current presence of immigrants in the military has deep historical roots: noncitizens have fought in the U.S. Armed forces since the Revolutionary War. Foreign born residents comprised half of all U.S. military recruits during the 1840s and 20 percent of the 1.5 million service members in the Union Army during the Civil War.

¹ Those with temporary resident status (e.g., for study, business, or pleasure), refugee status, or undocumented status are not eligible.

*SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRANTS FROM
MILITARY LEADERS*

“My parents, Luther and Maud Ariel Powell, emigrated from Jamaica in the 1920s, and settled in a neighborhood in the South Bronx, New York. My father worked as a shipping clerk; my mother, a seamstress. I grew up surrounded by two cultures, and took pride in my immigrant roots. Upon graduating from college, I took a commission in the Army, and found, in that institution, opportunities to strive and succeed beyond my imagination.

I am proud that much of that military success can be attributed to the contributions of immigrants. The burden of defending our ideals and freedom has always been shared by those who were not yet citizens. I have witnessed time and again the bravery and valor of soldiers defending a country that they consider their adopted home. They are grateful for the opportunities the United States provides, and we are grateful for their sacrifices ...

While we ensure our national security and secure our borders, **we must also recognize the socially, economically, and culturally revitalizing force immigrants play in America.** America’s diversity is the basis for its greatness, and we’re a country that prides itself on our openness to change.

-- Gen. Colin Powell testifying before Congress.

“There are numerous examples of immigrants [in the armed services] who have already given their lives... I’m hopeful that at the end of the immigration debate, we can show the American people that we addressed a serious and urgent problem with sound judgment, honesty, common sense, and compassion.”

-- Sen. John McCain testifying before Congress

- **The military benefits greatly from the service of its foreign-born.** Noncitizen recruits offer greater racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity than citizen recruits. This diversity is particularly valuable given the military’s increasingly global agenda.
- Non-citizens do extremely well in the military. In fact, Marine General Peter Pace offered the following testimony before Congress about the importance of immigrants in the military:

“[Immigrant soldiers and marines] are extremely dependable ... some 8, 9, or 10 percent fewer immigrants wash out of our initial training programs than do those who are currently citizens. Some 10 percent or more than those who are currently citizens complete their first initial period of obligated service to the country.”

Additionally, statistics show that:

- Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic noncitizens who have served for at least 3 months are nearly 10 percent less likely to leave the service than white citizens.
- Noncitizens who have served for at least 36 months are 9 to 20 percent less likely to leave the service than white citizens.

IMMIGRATION POLICY & RECENT LEGISLATION

- Military services and USCIS have worked together to streamline the citizenship application process for service members.
- In July 2002, the President issued an executive order that made noncitizen members of the armed forces eligible for expedited US citizenship.²
- Revisions in the US citizenship law in 2004 have allowed USCIS to conduct naturalization interviews and ceremonies for foreign-born US armed forces members serving at military bases abroad. According to USCIS data from April 2008, more than 5,050 foreign-born service members have become citizens during overseas military naturalization ceremonies while on active duty in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Kenya, as well as in the Pacific aboard the USS Kitty Hawk.
- Since September 2001, USCIS has naturalized more than 37,250 foreign-born members of the armed forces and granted posthumous citizenship to 111 service members.

SUPPORT THE REUNITING FAMILIES ACT

- The Reuniting Families Act (S. 1085/HR 2709) was introduced by members of the 111th Congress in Summer 2009 to re-emphasize family unity in the U.S. immigration system. The proposed Act would work to clear the immigration backlog and help legal immigrants reunite with family members.
- Among the benefits the bill would bring into the immigration system, such as addressing the decades-long backlog for certain countries and protecting widows, widowers and orphans by allowing them to wait in line

SPOTLIGHT: WA State War Veteran

Shortly after Benito Valdez arrived in the U.S. 14 years ago, he petitioned the federal government to have his children join him here. His wife had died 10 years earlier, and Valdez wanted to have his children near him and his grandchildren to grow up in the country he had fought for during World War II.

But 14 years after he filed for them to green cards, his children, now grown and with families of their own, are still waiting in the Philippines to join him here. Now 84, Valdez lives alone in a small apartment on Beacon Hill and his family worries that he will die before they are reunited.

His plight is similar to that of an untold number of other Filipino American WWII veterans in Washington. The men are among some 200,000 Filipinos who were drafted by the U.S. during World War II when the Philippines was a U.S. commonwealth. Decades later, "they came to a strange country as old men," said Sluggo Rigor Jr., a local Filipino leader. "They saw the Vietnamese, the Cambodians come as refugees, able to bring their families and offered resettlement. And these men fought under the flag and died for this country and they can't bring their families."

It is believed that more than 100 Filipinos who fought alongside U.S. soldiers in the war made their homes in this state. Most arrived in the years after H.W. President Bush signed the Immigration Act of 1990, which granted immediate citizenship to Filipinos who had been drafted by the U.S. to fight in the war. Citizenship also meant these new Americans could petition the government to bring their immediate family members here.

But all these years later, many, including Valdez, are still waiting for their families to join them due to a tremendous administrative backlog.

Valdez now says, "I was very disappointed when I found out that the citizenship granted to Filipino World War II veterans was only for the veteran and did not include their families. How could this happen? How can we live alone in America at our age? ... I guess I don't understand democracy. We were the most loyal allies of America in the Far East. Yet here we are still waiting."

Excerpted from "For Veterans, days go by—alone" reported by Lornet Turnbull and published in the Seattle Times on Feb. 2, 2006.

² Executive Order 13269 – Expedited Naturalization of Aliens and Noncitizen Nationals Serving in an Active-Duty Status During the War on Terrorism. July 3, 2002.

for a visa after the death of a sponsoring relative, the Reuniting Families Act would **respect the contributions of Filipino World War II veterans by reducing their children's waiting times for an immigrant visa.**

- U.S. Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) has explained the need for a family reunification bill: “Family unity is a deeply-rooted American value, and it should continue to be a main idea by which we draw our newest Americans. Strong, unified families help maintain stable communities and tend to work hard, pay taxes and start business that create jobs. **We have clear societal and economic reasons to ensure that family reunification is at the core of our legal immigration system** ... this bill will help legal immigrants reunite with their families rather than forcing them to wait for year apart.”³
- Senator Schumer, one of the bill co-sponsors, has said: “**No matter our disagreements about how to reform our immigration laws, we can at least agree that families should not be made to suffer in the process.** We can have a policy that is tough, but fair, and emphasizing family unity as a principle is key to ensuring that fairness.”⁴

SOURCES:

- “Noncitizens in Today’s Military: Final Report” by the CNA (Center for Naval Analyses), April 2005
- “Immigrants in the U.S. Armed Forces” by Jeanne Batalova, Migration Policy Institute, May 15, 2008
- “Contributions of Immigrants to the United States Armed Forces” S. Hrg. 109-884, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, July 10, 2006.
- OneAmerica June 1st 2009 Press Release: OneAmerica Launches Northwest Component of National Campaign to Launch Immigration Reform for America.

³ From the homepage of U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Press Released dated May 20, 2009, found at: <http://gillibrand.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/?id=cc4c8961-bf60-4182-a3ec-e96bc338ee30>

⁴ Id.