

# Becoming a Naturalized American

*It's free! It's easy! It's meaningless!*

by Gerda Bikales

The deadly attack on America has united all Americans, native-born and immigrant, in defense of our country. We have rediscovered our patriotism and reflected upon some forgotten truths. With lengthening distance from the tragic events, we now ask ourselves what we can do to rebuild our frayed sense of cohesion and common destiny.

We must start by defining ourselves as Americans, members of a family with affective ties to one another. These are not based on bloodlines; they rest on an appreciation of our unique history, a belief in the freedom and dignity of the individual, and a commitment to the civic responsibilities that sustain these ties. Others can join our family, but they first must convince us that they have learned our history and values and that they will respect them. American citizens are inside this special

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family circle, and all others are outside it. There is a difference between citizens and non-citizens, which we have disregarded to our increasing peril.

As an immigrant who joined this American family nearly five decades ago, I have watched uneasily as every naturalization requirement has been lowered, eroding the significance of citizenship in the process. It is now merely a matter of filing papers and waiting to appear before the Immigration and Naturalization Service for a pro-forma interview and swearing-in. It demands little thought or study, virtually no emotional investment, and too often is perceived only as permission to sponsor relatives for immigration and to vote one's interests on election day.

To help revitalize the meaning of U.S. citizenship, I suggest the following:

#### CHARACTER WITNESSES

I was required to bring two character witnesses to my INS interview, U.S. citizens who had known me for five years. It was difficult to find such people, not because of my defective character but because it meant their taking time from work. Two Americans willing to give up time and face a government official constitute a solid endorsement of the would-be American's quality.

This requirement was abandoned years ago. It

should be reinstated to screen out persons whose behavior has been detrimental to American society.

#### BACKGROUND CHECK

Candidates for citizenship must undergo a thorough background check. A criminal record should disqualify applicants. Since citizens cannot be deported, naturalizing criminals is unforgivable.

Unfortunately, given the exploding numbers of immigrants seeking citizenship, background checks have become superficial. At times they have been abandoned entirely under pressure from politicians seeking immigrant votes.

#### CIVIC READINESS

We have practically given up requiring that an applicant demonstrate knowledge of our history and political institutions along with having a basic command of English. People as young as fifty who have lived here twenty years without learning English can now take a simple test in their native tongue, often administered by a government contractor committed to passing everyone. Once accepted, such ill-prepared citizens generate demands for ballots in foreign languages and for other government services in various languages.

These misguided practices have diminished our sense of nationhood – so much so that on September 11 we surprised ourselves when we realized how deeply we still love our country. Henceforth, we must insist that English is the language of our government, including its voting procedures, and that every youngster be schooled in the language history has given us.

#### RENOUNCING PREVIOUS ALLEGIANCES

In this era of dual citizenship, we cast a blind eye on naturalized Americans who cling to their original citizenship and vote in elections abroad. There is much talk about toning down or even eliminating the loyalty oath that traditionally every naturalized citizen takes.

If we are serious about cultivating attitudes that will keep us united beyond the initial response to terrorism, we must reject the notion of trans-nationality. Dual citizenship is unacceptable. One is either an American or one is a foreigner. The loyalty oath to the United States must be retained, its antiquated language updated for

easier comprehension, but its sentiments undiluted.

The recitation of the loyalty oath in a foreign tongue must be stopped, for it signals to the newest members of the American family that its charter members are indifferent to English. Not so! We care profoundly, for English is the bridge we all have to cross to come together in the public square.

#### A DIGNIFIED CEREMONY

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The importance of becoming a citizen of this nation must be reinforced in the dignity of the ceremony itself, which should be taken out of football fields and movie theaters and returned to the courtroom, presided over by a robed judge. Becoming a U.S. citizen is a judicial matter, not to be treated as a mere administrative detail. The seriousness of the occasion demands formal yet personalized recognition of each individual’s decision to join our family.

Reforming our naturalization laws is essential to reduce the mutual distrust and estrangement that have been allowed to build among members of the great American family. It is a highly symbolic but also practical way to lower the threat of harboring terrorists in our midst. •