



[Return to the Article](#)

March 28, 2006

Citizenship: The Precious Legacy

By [Thomas Lifson](#)

The problem posed by the presence of millions of illegal aliens in our midst has no easy and immediately practical solution. Sweeping rhetoric from advocates of one clean—cut position or another may sound satisfying, but would cause chaos in practice. *De facto* open borders or mass expulsion, if ever were attempted, would be disasters. When being practical, we tend to focus on immediate practical issues like border security, drivers licenses and insurance, and the payment of income and Social Security taxes.

Lost in most of the arguments is the deep meaning that the concept of American citizenship holds for us.

In classical antiquity, the proudest boast and most effective shield a man could utter was the Latin phrase, '*Civis Romanus sum*' ('I am a Roman citizen'). This prideful status carried both obligations and protections, and was not something acquired idly by mere birth within a certain territory.

Americans have married the concept of constitutional rights and duties to the notion of *membership* in a polity, producing a national culture of citizenship that has repeatedly astonished the world. Our ability to rise as one in defense of liberty, despite the seeming softness, inattention, selfishness, and weakness that has fooled villains like Tojo, Hitler and bin Laden into believing we lack the spine to resist them, has caused them and their adherents everlasting regret.

We Americans are citizens, not 'subjects' like our British cousins. We used to see citizenship as meaning the ability to vote, to speak—up, and to hold a claim on rights bought and paid for with the blood of patriots selflessly spilled on our behalf. With this legacy came certain obligations. Not simply paying taxes, but actively contributing to the national defense, taking the time to learn about political issues and voting, and, as dramatically embodied in the classic New England Town Meetings, taking part in civic life to produce a better community and country.

Increasingly and dismayingly, citizenship has seemed to become merely an irrevocable green card, a permission to live here with no obligation to learn the common language, serve the commonweal, or behave in a distinctively American mode of civic conduct. Anyone whose mother happens to find herself within the borders of the United States at the time of birth, legally or not, is granted citizenship as a right. In a growing number of ethnic communities, generations born in the United States decline the use of English, the language of the Declaration and Constitution, as their mother tongue. We even print ballots in multiple languages.

It is time for us to think long and hard once again about what American citizenship really means.

Many of the greatest American citizens have been immigrants. Denied membership in our community by birth, creative, energetic, brave, and hard—working people have flocked here from every corner of the earth and repaid in full their debt for the freedoms and prosperity they have enjoyed as Americans. Often, their efforts are inspirational. I cannot listen to the song 'God Bless America' written by immigrant Irving Berlin,

or think of the sacrifices of immigrant soldiers, or enjoy the fruits of the creative immigrant minds working in Silicon Valley today, without pause to bless America as a beacon unto the world, allowing those yearning to be free to realize the blessing of liberty.

I want America's door to remain open to immigration. We benefit from it too much to close it in a fit of pique and foreclose the possibility of another Albert Einstein, An Wang, or Carlos Santana coming our way.

But we have to insist that citizenship mean something more than a ticket on the gravy train of welfare benefits and enhanced power for ethnic block politics. Citizenship is precious. It is a gift from our Founding Fathers, who recognized the Divine origins of our rights and staked all on the quest to establish them for posterity. Citizenship is a gift from the warriors who fought to defend us. It is far too precious to offer, willy-nilly, to people who have flouted our laws.

Whatever solution or compromise the political process comes to, regarding the illegal presence of millions in our midst, I do not want citizenship bestowed as a matter of course. It must be earned, and its duties affirmed by all who would wish to enjoy the status of American citizen. At a minimum this means learning English and studying our political culture and traditions. It means swearing a solemn oath, and relinquishing all loyalties to foreign flags. And it means making amends if the citizen—to-be has violated our sovereignty in arriving within our borders. We dishonor the blood sacrifice made in our behalf if we do any less.

Suggestions of illegal aliens paying a 'fine' have been mooted, as if a few thousand dollars could buy the precious gift of citizenship. I find this offensive, and believe it would lead to nothing but derision for citizenship in the longer term. What we need more than money is commitment to our civic culture and life, a sense of responsibility to America and Americans.

Perhaps we need a two-tier solution. Maybe those whose identity and ultimate allegiance lies elsewhere can be offered temporary residence permits once they have made good on the back taxes they owe, have passed a background check for criminality, and agree not to burden our social welfare system with their needs. But if they do not buy into the entire package of citizenship, responsibilities and all, they do not deserve its rewards.

Citizenship should be reserved for those who understand and are committed to American fundamental values, and who stand ready to follow in the footsteps of patriots. Anything less diminishes us and our precious gift of citizenship.

Thomas Lifson is the editor and publisher of The American Thinker.

Page Printed from: http://www.americanthinker.com/2006/03/citizenship_the_precious_legacy.html at September 30, 2010 - 07:00:32 PM CDT