



July 11, 2016, 08:12 am

# When America denies citizenship to servicemembers

By Terry Babcock-Lumish, contributor, and Kenji Price



Getty Images

For many living and working within the Beltway, it took the Supreme Court declining to hear Leneuoti Tuaua's case to learn that as "non-citizen U.S. nationals," American Samoans are permitted to serve in the U.S. military but cannot cast votes in federal elections. And Tuaua is not alone.

When the Department of Defense deems a young volunteer fit to serve the country in uniform, the ensuing contract is a serious one.

According to the Partnership for a New American Economy, no fewer than 284 immigrants died advancing the nation's security interests since Sept. 11, 2001. Yet, to date, in a country that was borne out of blood shed on battlefields, many veterans anxiously await the U.S. government upholding its end of the bargain by granting the most fundamental status of democratic society: citizenship.

Unfortunately, this is not a new story. For years, the United States has struggled to guarantee basic rights for those put in harm's way. Japanese-Americans who fought honorably during World War II redeployed to a country that sanctioned the internment of their family members without cause. Similarly, African-Americans returning from the Korean War discovered that hard-earned combat medals proved worthless when exercising basic freedoms: marrying a white sweetheart or using the same restroom as those who served alongside them.

A 2015 Gallup poll revealed that approximately two-thirds of Americans agree that even undocumented immigrants should have the opportunity to earn citizenship under certain conditions, which include military service. Far from a hypothetical, there are options available.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 created a pathway to citizenship for those who serve in combat, but 50 years on, veterans are being deported before earning full rights. While there is no official data on veterans deported each year, the number could be substantial, as approximately 5,000 green-card holders enlist in the United States Armed Forces annually.

Today, there is bipartisan support for legislation creating conditional residency for undocumented high-school graduates to either enlist in the military or pursue further schooling upon high-school graduation. The Congressional Budget Office forecasts that passage of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act would increase taxable income and reduce deficits up to \$2.2 billion over the next 10 years. However, so long as immigration remains a toxic election issue, Dreamers' ambitions to contribute to American life and society remain stalled.

Quick to exploit public fear, critics will point to examples of less-than-shining behavior from veterans, which, under current federal law, require deportation. To be sure, there are credible arguments for including deportation in the bundle of punitive measures designed to address this kind of conduct. However, experts in transitions from military service to civilian life remind us that the physical and psychological wounds many veterans suffer as a result of their wartime service can contribute to the daily challenges of reintegrating into the very society they were charged with protecting.

Jettisoning these warriors as they navigate obstacles such as post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness and other related challenges, should be a nonstarter. Lawmakers like Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.), a former Marine and the son of immigrants, understand the unique experiences faced by this vulnerable group, and are advocating for their rights via legislation such as H.R. 5012, the Restoring Respect for Immigrant Service in Uniform Act. Nonetheless, how many Americans recognize that as they read these words, veterans sit in a dedicated "Deported Veteran Support House" in Tijuana, Mexico, more commonly known as "The Bunker"?

Sensible people may differ in their approaches to comprehensive immigration reform, but there is little justification for withholding citizenship long-promised to honorably discharged men and women. Efforts from both sides of the aisle — from Sen. **John McCain** (R-Ariz.) to Sen. **Patrick Leahy** (D-Vt.) — reflect an understanding of the vital contributions new Americans make to society, both in uniform and beyond.

We do not take lightly the complexity of immigration policy, but fear-mongering must never drown out bipartisan voices of reason and experience. Congress and the nation at-large are overdue in justly serving the legal permanent residents who take that solemn oath to

serve our nation. Only then will we have lived up to our commitment to those who quietly protect our right to debate whether they deserve to be full citizens.

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**TAGS: Patrick Leahy, John McCain**

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