

ANALYSIS

# Army Tightens Rules For Immigrants Joining As A Path To Citizenship

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NPR's Melissa Block talks with Margaret Stock, a retired U.S. Army officer, who created a program to recruit skilled immigrants. She says the new rules will bring down enlistment.

## Transcript

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MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

The Pentagon is making it harder for immigrants to join the Armed Forces as a path to citizenship. The policy change was announced earlier this month. It affects all foreign nationals, including green card holders. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis says he believes the military needs to protect itself from potential espionage within its ranks. As a U.S. Army officer, Margaret Stock created a program to recruit specialized immigrants to the military, a program known as MAVNI. Since then, that program has been suspended. Col. Stock is now retired from the army and is an immigration attorney. She joins us from WBUR in Boston. Col. Stock, explain what happened this month with immigrants in the Army.

MARGARET STOCK: Before Friday, October 13, 2017, immigrants who joined the military could take advantage of an expedited path to United States citizenship. On Friday, October 13, the current administration reversed the expedited path to citizenship. They basically said it's not available anymore. And they are only allowing immigrants serving in the military to obtain their citizenship if they negotiate a lot of bureaucratic obstacles. The DOD also said that they have to complete an extensive set of background checks.

BLOCK: What was your reaction when you learned that the Pentagon was shutting off this fast track towards citizenship in the military?

STOCK: I was appalled by this because it's obvious the military is going to lose a valuable

source of recruits. The foreign-born right now are 13.5 percent of the population. And the percentage of the population that's foreign-born is growing. So if you're going to say that the military can't recruit 13.5 percent of the population, you're restricting military recruiting only to citizens. You're going to end up with much less quality in terms of language - foreign language skills, cultural skills.

BLOCK: But the rationale behind these moves, though, is to do proper vetting - just to do more extensive background checks. So it's not saying they can't come in, period. It's saying, let's slow this down, right?

STOCK: Well, that's the ostensible excuse for doing it. And nobody's against background checks. Everybody thinks background checks are great. But when you do the type of background checks that they're doing, you end up with nobody in the military (laughter), essentially. When customs and border patrol did similar background checks, they flunked two-thirds of their applicants. The proper way to handle espionage threats is to investigate them, prosecute people. But what you don't do is label an entire group of people as security threats just because they were born in a foreign country.

BLOCK: Let's talk about the MAVNI program, the immigrant recruitment program that you started. And this was designed to bring in specifically recruits with language, medical skills. What was your thinking back then? What was the need that you saw?

STOCK: It was under the Bush administration. And the September 11 terrorist attacks had happened. One of the reasons why the United States was unable to prevent the 9/11 terrorist attacks was that we didn't have enough people working within the government who spoke foreign languages. So they had intercepts from the hijackers, they found out later, that hadn't been translated. There weren't enough native-born Americans with the requisite language skills to do this kind of work. So post-9/11, the Bush administration authorized Military Accessions Vital to the National Interests, also known as the MAVNI program. That's the acronym. And the idea was to bring in highly vetted legal immigrants if they had language capabilities - native language capabilities - or specialized medical skills. We had a great success - great successes with this program.

BLOCK: What are you hearing from the people that you recruited through the MAVNI program or maybe you people you represent now as an immigration attorney about this?

STOCK: Well what I'm hearing is disturbing. I'm hearing that people's contracts are being canceled, that everybody's being told they're a security threat. There was one person who had been supposed to be in the NASA astronaut program. And they told him he couldn't participate because they refused to give him a security clearance because he came into the military through this program. I'm hearing that a lot of people's careers have been derailed. People are frustrated. We've had a number of people that have just been held on military bases for more than a year, doing nothing. What I am advising green card holders to do right now is don't join the military because it's faster to get your citizenship through

civilian citizenship laws than it is through the Pentagon's new rules.

**BLOCK:** Margaret Stock is a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel. She's now an immigration lawyer based in Anchorage, Alaska. Col. Stock, thanks very much.

**STOCK:** Thank you. Thank you for having me on the show.

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