

US immigration service quietly removes “nation of immigrants” from its mission statement

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Last Thursday, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the main agency tasked with helping immigrants move towards citizenship, changed its mission statement without any notice or fanfare. The new statement is notable primarily for the fact that it dropped the phrase “nation of immigrants” to describe the United States, and instead highlights the law enforcement aspects of the agency’s functions.

The mission statement now available on the agency’s webpage reads: “US Citizenship and Immigration services administers the nation’s lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honoring our values.”

Prior to last Thursday, the statement available on the agency’s homepage read: “USCIS secures America’s promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system.”

Anticipating protests, the White House declared that the change in the mission statement did not originate from the President. This was reiterated by a USCIS official, who told the *Washington Examiner* in an email: “The White House did not direct USCIS to change its mission statement. It was developed and debated within the agency by USCIS Director Cissna during his first senior leadership conference with USCIS staff, and reflects the director’s guiding principles for the agency. The new mission statement also has the support of the secretary of Homeland

Security.”

Frank Cissna was appointed to the post of director by Donald Trump in October 2017. Since taking office, Cissna has overseen changes in the USCIS’s operations including increased security checks for foreign workers applying for visas, higher threshold for asylum application in order to discourage people from seeking sanctuary in the US, and a more complicated process for Green Card applications.

In a memorandum sent to the USCIS staff, Cissna explained the reason for the new mission statement claiming that it was “simple and straightforward,” and that it clearly defined “agency’s role in our country’s lawful immigration system and the commitment we have to the American people.”

Cissna focused on the fact that the earlier mission statement had described those accessing the USCIS’s services as “customers” to reiterate his claim that it did not quite capture the spirit of the agency’s function: “The American people, through Congress, have entrusted USCIS with the stewardship of our legal immigration programs that allow foreign nationals to visit, work, live, and seek refuge in the United States. We are also responsible for ensuring that those who naturalize are dedicated to this country, share our values, assimilate into our communities, and understand their responsibility to help preserve our freedom and liberty...Use of the term [customers] leads to the erroneous belief that applicants and petitioners, rather than the American people, are whom we ultimately serve.”

The change in the mission statement does not automatically imply a complete overhaul in the way the agency is supposed to work. However, it illustrates the

further intensification of the anti-immigrant offensive being waged by the Trump administration.

In a statement to the *New York Times*, León Rodríguez, who headed the agency under Barack Obama from 2014 to 2017, a period in which more than a million immigrants were cruelly deported from the United States, said that the new mission statement marked “a particularly sad turn of history.”

“We should not forget that under the discarded mission statement, the integrity and national security functions of U.S.C.I.S. grew — dramatically so — showing that we could be both a welcoming nation and a safe one,” Rodríguez said. “We should stop to reflect about the many opportunities that America will lose because of the attitudes reflected in this statement, and ask ourselves whether this is really the country we want to be.”

The new mission statement does not stop at removing the long-used phrase “nation of immigrants,” it also removes all mention of citizenship—instead of “immigration and citizenship benefits,” USCIS now just provides “immigration benefits,” and it completely drops the phrase “promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship.” And its distinction between the “American people” and those who apply for its services basically obscures the fact that the overwhelming majority of petitioners for immigrants are US citizens petitioning for family members, albeit naturalized citizens.

Historically, the USCIS, known from 1933 until 2003 as the Immigration and Naturalization Services, has been the one arm of the three immigration agencies under the aegis of the Department of Homeland Security—the other two being Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—that is not supposed to deal with the enforcement aspects of immigration. However, with the increased militarization of the immigration policies and the criminalization of immigrants, the new mission statement of USCIS makes it evident that the agency’s function will soon be akin to that of the CBP and ICE.

With Trump’s speech last week to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in National Harbor, Maryland, serving as a guidepost, this is just the beginning.

In a rambling address that is quite extraordinary in its ignorance, bigotry and distortion of reality, Trump

presented a world in which the United States was under attack by swarms of criminals, rapists, hit-and-run drivers, human traffickers, all of whom are “aliens” who have been let into the country “because our immigration laws are so bad.” In a particularly vile and repellant manner, he compared immigrants to a vicious, poisonous snake that kills a foolish, yet “tender woman” who provides it shelter.

Trump claimed that the country was over-run by “animals...who cut [people] into little pieces” and who apparently were protected by laws that favored them, and provided them with safe harbor. The “laws are just against us...we are letting people in, and its going to be a lot of trouble.” But, his administration was up to the task of “protecting like never before”: “In 2017, our brave ICE officers arrested more than 100,000 criminal aliens who have committed tens and thousands of crimes.” And that was just the beginning. Trump ominously promised that his administration is “going to take care of the country. Okay? We’re going to take care of the country.”

Recent reports have revealed that the Trump administration has been ramping up its anti-immigrant drive through the casting of wider dragnets, the systematic separation of undocumented migrant families and the establishment of border checkpoints that violate Fourth amendment rights far from America’s borders. In this context, the promise to “take care of the country” can only be interpreted as a threat to intensify the persecution of working class immigrants, many of whom are already victims of violence and poverty, and who come to the United States in a desperate search for a better life for themselves and their children.

Additionally, the change in the UCIS mission statement ultimately reflects the bipartisan drive to slash legal immigration. Trump has recently come out in support of a proposal by Iowa Senator Charles Grassley to cut 20 million family-based petitions over the next few decades.



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