US Citizenship and Immigration Services unveils new initiative targeting naturalized citizens

Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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L. Francis Cissna, the Director of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), announced this week the creation of a new office that will be focused on identifying American citizens who "cheated" in their naturalization application.

The ultimate goal of the office is to seek to remove the citizenship rights of such immigrants in civil court proceedings, while also prosecuting them on the charge of criminal fraud. Presented as a straightforward and innocuous initiative, the move marks yet another step in ongoing and relentless attack against immigrants, and more broadly on citizenship rights in the United States.

Details about the powers, the budget and the general scope of the new office are as yet sketchy. In an interview to the Associated Press earlier this week, Cissna stated that the Los Angeles-based office will soon start hiring lawyers and immigration officers. The new hires will initially be tasked with looking closely at the files of citizens suspected to have assumed a new identity in order to avoid deportation, and who eventually succeeded in acquiring permanent residency and naturalization. There were no specifics given about the numbers of immigrants who fell within the purview of this new initiative, or for that matter, costs associated with such an effort.

The US government has pursued charges against naturalized citizens who have acquired citizenship under false pretenses in the past. However, as Cissna admitted, this has been done more sporadically, and on a case-by-case basis. In fact, the US government had not even paid attention to supposed fraud of this nature until a decade ago, when a border officer detected about 200 people had used different identities to get green cards and citizenship after they were previously issued deportation orders. In the years since, the Department of Justice has filed 305 civil denaturalization cases. These numbers, one would think, are not high enough to justify the expense or the efforts currently being instituted by the Trump administration. However, there are other kinds of numbers that are being presented as more pertinent.

Two years ago, an internal report for the USCIS claimed that there were 315,000 fingerprint records of immigrants who had been deported or had criminal convictions, that had not been uploaded to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) database that checks immigrants' identities. The report further claimed that 800 of these immigrants had acquired citizenship under a different name. Even if this were to be true, it would still represent a minuscule fraction of the total number of naturalized citizens in the country.

In his interview, Cissna stated, "The people who are going to be targeted by this—they know full well who they are because they were ordered removed under a different identity and they intentionally lied about it when they applied for citizenship later on. It may be some time before we get to their case, but we'll get to them." He tried to soften the threat by insisting that that his agency was not concerned about those whose applications had minor discrepancies. However, that is hardly a reassurance given the escalating and bipartisan anti-immigrant offensive that has gained new impetus under the Trump administration.

In February 2018, a few months after Cissna's appointment as Director, USCIS removed the term "nation of immigrants" from its mission statement and replaced it with a statement that highlighted the law enforcement aspects of the agency's functions. While

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the change was explained as a small correction that merely—and more correctly—reflected the agency's primary commitment to the "American people" and "our values," it was in fact a more ominous sign of the times.

Prior to the change, Cissna had already put in place several measures that made a complex immigration system even more arduous for working class applicants. This includes increased security checks for foreign workers applying for visas, higher threshold for asylum applications and a more complicated process for Green Card application.

The establishment of a new office of this sort under the aegis of the USCIS marks the first time any US administration has attempted to address claims of citizenship fraud on a concerted and coordinated basis. Ironically, prior to the last decade, prosecutions pertaining to denaturalization followed through by the US government were focused primarily on Nazi war criminals who had lied on their applications. Now the US government is targeting immigrants in ways that would have been familiar to the functionaries of the Third Reich and that had been declared to be inhumane and illegal in the Nuremberg trials over 70 years ago.

Though it is being presented as a simple administrative measure to facilitate already established legal guidelines, Cissna's announcement should be seen and understood for the warning it really represents. Coming as it does, on the heels of a sustained attack on immigrants—first on the basis of their being undocumented and now supposedly because of suspect documentation—this is yet another dangerous sign of the ongoing attack on citizenship rights and the destruction of democratic norms.

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