

# What it means to be an American

A new test for citizenship will stress concepts of our history — not dates, names

**Dec. 1, 2006**

By **PATTY REINERT**

Houston Chronicle Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A study hint for immigrants preparing to take the citizenship test in 2008: Stop worrying so much about names and dates and start thinking conceptually about what it means to be an American.

The U.S. government announced Thursday that it was redesigning the test to put less emphasis on memorizing facts and more weight on understanding the nation's history and government.

"Our goal is to inspire immigrants to learn about the civic values of this nation so that after they take the oath of citizenship they will participate fully in our great democracy," said Emilio Gonzalez, director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Volunteer citizenship applicants in 10 cities, including San Antonio and El Paso, will begin taking a tryout version of an oral exam in January before the questions are revised and used nationwide in early 2008.

Volunteers in the pilot project can immediately revert to the old test if they find the new questions too difficult to answer, so that offering to take the new test will not jeopardize their chances of becoming naturalized.

## **Six out of 10 to pass**

Immigration officials released 144 sample questions Thursday. On the civics portion of the citizens examination, applicants will be asked 10 questions drawn from a master list of 100. As now, applicants will need to answer six correctly.

Rather than being asked to simply list the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial), citizenship applicants could be asked to explain why there are three branches (so no branch is too powerful; to separate the power of government.)

Instead of being asked "Who was Martin Luther King Jr.?" (A civil rights leader), applicants could be asked "Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream for America. What was his dream?"

Acceptable answers include: "Civil rights for all" or "Equality for all Americans."

Gonzales said the current exam, which includes such questions as "What colors are the stripes on the flag?" (red and white) and "Who wrote 'The Star-Spangled Banner'?" (Francis Scott Key)," encourages applicants to memorize facts just to pass a test.

"That doesn't guarantee that they understand the meaning behind the question," he said.

## Higher failure rate?

Magali Candler, a Houston immigration lawyer who heads the regional chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, predicted the new test may produce a higher failure rate for some immigrants, particularly the elderly — in part because even immigrants with good English skills sometimes have difficulty expressing broad concepts orally.

But she said immigrants likely will rise to the challenge.

"I have always thought that my clients studying for naturalization knew more about American civics than many of my friends and neighbors who were born here," she said.

Whether the test will be more educational or meaningful could depend upon how flexible examiners are on accepting immigrants' answers, she said.

On the draft question "What does freedom of religion mean?", for example, "there are a lot of different right answers," she said.

Even on the current test, she said, a client had trouble answering a question about the important benefits of becoming a naturalized citizen .

The examiner was seeking a response like, "You get to vote," but Candler's client answered, "You can't get deported."

"That's a great answer," she said. "And it's true."

John Keeley, a spokesman for the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, which seeks to reduce immigration, praised the new questions.

"It's striking that instead of answering how many bars are on the U.S. flag (13), they will need to know why we have 100 U.S. senators (because there are two from each state)," he said. "We'll never agree upon a perfect exam, but I think this achieves the mission of bringing greater heft and integrity to the test."

About 800,000 people apply for naturalization in the United States every year, according to private studies.

The estimated cost of the test revamp is \$6.5 million, which includes launching the pilot project, studying the results, narrowing the list of questions to 100 and implementing the new test nationwide.